ELDER PAISIOS OF MOUNT ATHOS
SPIRITUAL COUNSELS
Volume II

SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

Holy Monastery
"Evangelist John the Theologian"
SOUROTI, THESSALONIKI, GREECE
2008

Title of the Original:
ΛΟΓΟΙ Β′
Πνευματικὴ Ἀφύπνιση
1st Edition 1999
7th Edition 2007
Published by the Holy Monastery
"Evangelist John the Theologian"
Souroti, Thessaloniki, Greece

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In cooperation with the
Holy Monastery "Evangelist John the Theologian"

1st Edition 2008

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PROLOGUE

The blessed Elder Paisios began speaking to us about the difficult years ahead as early as 1980. He often said that we, too, might experience many of the events described in the Book of Revelation. His purpose, of course, was to instil in us a positive concern[1] so that we may intensify our spiritual struggle, resist the spirit of indifference, which he had seen slipping treacherously even into the ranks of Monasticism, overcome self-love and combat our weaknesses in order to strengthen our prayer. "Our weaknesses," he used to say, "weaken our prayer and we can neither help ourselves nor the people we pray for. Wireless communications[2] become useless. And if the wireless is down, we will be defeated by the enemy."

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[1] "Positive or good concern is the good restlessness and anguish for the *good struggle*. The person struggles, observes himself, recognizes what obstructs his spiritual progress, expresses concern, asks for help and does spiritual work." Elder Paisios, *Spiritual Counsels*, Volume V, *Passions and Virtues*, Holy Monastery "Evangelist John the Theologian", Souroti, Thessaloniki.

[2] Throughout his counsels, the Elder made frequent reference to wireless communications, meaning, of course, our contact with God through prayer. He was fond of this metaphor, having served during his youth as a wireless operator in the Greek army.

The overall prologue of the first volume, entitled *With Pain and Love for Contemporary Man,* features a comprehensive account of the origin, selection and compilation of the material contained in the series *The Spiritual Counsels of the Elder Paisios of Mount Athos*. In this present Volume II of the series, entitled *Spiritual Awakening*, we have included themes concerning the present-day reality. These themes call upon us to be in constant vigilance and readiness, preparing us for the difficult situations that we may confront one day. We have already realized what the Elder often noted: "We will go through storm after storm; this is how it will be for some years to come; an overall state of turmoil everywhere."

The second volume consists of five parts. The first part refers to the sense of indifference and irresponsibility prevailing in our time, and to the compelling duty of conscientious Christians to ease the situation through self-correction, prudent behaviour, confession of faith and prayer. At one point, the Elder noted, "I am not saying that we should take up banners and march in demonstrations, but that we should raise our hands towards God in prayer."

In the second part, the Elder kindles the zeal for spiritual work without confining us to a particular struggle. It is then up to each person to take up the struggle, according

to his own strength and *philotimo*,[3] and to live the life in Christ, which is Paradise on earth.

The third part refers to the short occupation period of Satan, which will give Christians the opportunity to witness to Christ again~~–~~, as in Holy Baptism, but conscientiously this time ~~–~~, to struggle against evil and to rejoice in advance ~~for~~ at the victory of Christ over Satan. The Elder used to say that the Saints would have envied this opportunity of ours: "Many Saints would have wanted to live in our time in order to take up the struggle earnestly. But it is now up to us...And we are unworthy; at least we should recognize our unworthiness." Effectively confronting the present situation requires the cultivation of a heroic spirit, as well as the spirit of selfless sacrifice.

In the fourth part, which addresses divine providence, faith, trust in God and divine assistance, we are guided toward the source from which we can draw the strength to confront any adversity.

Lastly, the fifth part focuses on the need for and the power of heartfelt prayer, a mighty weapon in combating the ever-increasing evil around us. The monks and nuns are called upon to be in an unceasing "state of alert", much like soldiers in time of war, constantly helping the people with prayer and carefully preventing the distortion of the spirit of Monasticism, and, thus, leaving a leaven for future generations. This last part concludes with a chapter that defines the most profound meaning of life, while reiterating the need for *metanoia* (change of mind), that is, repentance.

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[3] *Philotimo*, according to Elder Paisios, is the reverent distillation of goodness, the love shown by humble people, from which every trace of self has been filtered out. Their hearts are full of gratitude towards God and their fellow men, and out of spiritual sensitivity and a sense of honour they try to repay the slightest good which others do for them.

In this volume, and as always, the counsels and the activities of Elder Paisios are weighed in the scales of discernment. In these texts one may see the Elder deeply immersed in prayer, even as pilgrims knocked at his cell, ringing the brass bell hanging outside his wire fence and shouting impatiently and persistently, "Elder, stop praying for a minute, God will not be offended!" At other times he will abandon the desert and go out into the world as, otherwise, his absence from some common activity could be misunderstood and harm the Church. Or, we may see him overcome by righteous indignation in reaction to someone's blasphemies, while at other times he will remain silent and simply pray for the blasphemer. Given this, the reader should not rush to conclusions until all the chapters have been carefully studied. Above all, the reader should not isolate any of the counsels of the Elder and take them out of context, for this can lead to erroneous conclusions. The reader must always keep in mind that the Elder is speaking about a particular event or a specific question and is responding to a specific person, the salvation of whose soul is in the balance.

Those who knew the Elder remember the gentle consolation his words brought to their hearts, no matter how harsh his counsels may have been sometimes. The reason was that the Elder always aimed at healing the evil, not at stigmatizing it. He wanted to deliver the soul of his counselee, not expose the passion to public ridicule. These very same words, when used outside this context of pain and love, may be easily misconstrued and perhaps prove to be un-therapeutic. Instead of delivering divine consolation and security to our hearts, his words may arouse doubt and fear, or may even lead one to extremes, when in fact the Elder was neither a man of extremes, nor one-sided; he wanted to see good done, but properly, for people's benefit. Of course, he never hesitated to speak the truth; yet the truth was spoken with discernment. He would be overcome by righteous indignation at the desecration of anything sacred and would even announce the formidable events that were to take place, but his demeanour never caused fear and agitation in others. On the contrary, he conveyed the hope and the joy of the Resurrection, a joy that stems from the selfless sacrifice that relates one to Christ. And as long as one is related to Christ – by participating in the sacramental life of the Church and observing His commandments – one has nothing to fear, "neither devils nor tortures." In his characteristically graceful manner, the Elder said at one point, "When you set yourself aside, Christ is by your side." Christ, after all, is the very One we seek in all of our spiritual life. And this is where he points out a danger a Christian often encounters: If he does not cultivate the spirit of sacrifice, he cannot become a communicant in the life of Christ, and remains with a mere external formality, without an inner life.

The frequent references to the personal life of the Elder may trouble some readers, particularly when he seems to relate rather easily certain divine experiences of his. However, in putting the spoken word into writing, it was not possible to convey the difficulty with which the Elder spoke about himself, nor "the pressure" exerted in order to convince him to share some of these personal experiences. In fact, sometimes a certain event was related in instalments to various nuns and with different details, and, when the opportunity arose, we attempted very hesitantly to extract any additional information that would complete the narrative. Thus, in the course of twenty-eight years, during which the Elder spiritually guided our Sisterhood, he revealed for our benefit a few of the divine events in his life, which proved to be for us "a spiritual blood transfusion." This is why he was greatly saddened when the spiritual progress which he expected was not achieved; he would sometimes say with pain, "I am spreading fertilizer on sand."

We thank those who reviewed these texts prior to publication and expressed their respectful thoughts on the counsels of the Elder, and who also encouraged us to press on with this effort, since, as they told us, the counsels of the Elder are directed to all the members of the Church.

May the counsels in the volume *Spiritual Awakening*, through the prayers of the blessed Elder Paisios, who – as many do ascertain and confess – is always watching over us and who succours us with divine love, instil in our hearts a good concern so that we may struggle with *philotimo*, so that evil will retreat and the peace of God will prevail upon earth. Amen.

The Dormition of the Theotokos 1999

The Abbess of the Holy Hesychasterion
Mother Philothei
and the Sisters with me in Christ

– Geronda, why do you leave the *Kalyvi* and go into the forest?

– How can I possibly find any peace and quiet in the *Kalyvi*! It’s very noisy over there; someone is always ringing my bell, knocking on my door, tapping the window. I’ve found a wonderful spot in the forest. If I’m well, I plan on building a “spiritual nest” a radar post for prayer. It’s a wonderful spot. It’s just right for the summer, with lots of trees... I will even be able to stand up. As long as I’m able to do my spiritual duties, this is my joy, my nourishment! You must come sometime!

An Introduction to the Elder's Counsels

Geronda, how do you see things going?

– How do *you* see things going?

– What can *we* say, Geronda? You tell us.

– The present calm worries me. Something is up. We haven't quite understood what times we're living in and we don't even consider that we will die someday. I don't know what will happen; the situation is very difficult! The world's fate is in the hands of a few, but God is still holding the brakes. We need to do a lot of praying with pain and love for God to intervene. We need to take matters seriously and live spiritually. These are very difficult times. Much ash and trash has fallen, there is great indifference. A very strong wind is needed to blow them away. The old timers used to say that the time will come when people will start kicking. All barriers are discarded and nothing is respected. It's terrible! Everything has become Babylon. We must pray for people to come out of this Babylonian captivity. Read the Prayer of the Three Young Men,[1] to see how humbly they prayed; read

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[1] *The Prayer of Azariah and the Hymn of the Three Young Men* is an addition to the Book of Daniel inserted between 3:23 and 3:24 and found in the Greek Septuagint version of the Old Testament.

Psalm eighty three: *O God, who shall be compared to Thee? Be not silent, neither be still, O God...*[2] We have to do this, otherwise we struggle in vain. We need divine intervention.

Now, certain European sicknesses have come into the mix and they keep getting worse. A Cypriot family man who lived in England once told me "We are in spiritual danger; I must take my family away from England." Over there you can see a father taking his daughter, a mother her son. Everyone is "crowned" in marriage, everyone is "blessed". I am ashamed to even mention some of the things that are going on. But we don't lose any sleep over it. Now, I'm not saying that we ought to take up banners and go marching in protest, but we should turn our attention to the great danger ahead of us and raise our hands to God in prayer. We must defend ourselves against evil. We must put on the brakes because it seems some are trying to demolish everything. This is the time to repeat the verses from the Psalm: *Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb; yea, all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna, who said: Let us take to ourselves in possession the pastures of God.*[3]

There is great confusion. Everything is in a whirl, making people dizzy. People are like bees. If you strike the beehive, the bees will swarm in frenzy, they'll start buzzing around and then what they do depends on the wind. If it's a north wind, they'll go back into the beehive. If it's a south wind, they'll fly away. It's the same with people. They're constantly buffeted by a "national north

wind," or a "national south wind," and they are dizzy. Even so, in spite of all the turmoil, I do feel a sense of consolation, a certain sureness. The olive tree may have dried up, but it will sprout new shoots in time. There are some Christians upon whom God relies. There are still people of God, people of prayer, and the Benevolent God endures us and will provide again. These people of prayer give us hope. Do not be afraid. As a nation, we have survived many tempests and we were not lost; we shouldn't be scared of a brewing storm. We shall weather this too. God loves us. Man holds within him a hidden power for times of need. The difficult years will be few; they'll only be a passing storm.

Now, I'm not saying these things to scare you, I just want you to know where we stand. For us it's a great opportunity to celebrate the hardship, bear witness to our faith. Be with Christ, abide by His commandments, and pray to have divine powers in order to face any hardship. Forsake sinful passions, and divine Grace will come. Something that will greatly help is to have a good concern: Where are we, what are we going to encounter, so that we take the proper measures and are prepared. Our life needs to become more temperate; we need to live more spiritually. We need to love one another more. We need to help the suffering, the poor, with love, with compassion, with kindness. We need to pray that they'll all turn out to be good people.

God Will Provide the Solution

Our Benevolent God will provide in the best possible way, but we need to be very patient and careful. You see, often when people are impatient in unravelling a spool of thread, they only manage to tangle it even more. God disentangles patiently. Things won't be like this for long. God will sweep it all away! Around 1830, when a large contingent of the Turkish army was on the Holy Mountain, for a period of time there were no monks in the Monastery of Iviron. All the Fathers had left, some with the holy Relics, others to help in the Greek Revolution. Only one monk would come from afar to the Monastery to light the vigil oil lamps and sweep. As the Turkish troops were both inside and outside the Monastery, this poor monk would sweep and say, "My *Panaghia*,[4] what is going to happen with this situation?" One day, as he was praying to *Panaghia* with pain in his heart, he saw a woman approaching – it was the *Panaghia* – shining and with a radiant face. She took the broom from his hands and said to him, "Give me the broom, you don't know how to sweep well. I will sweep." She swept the floor and then disappeared into the sanctuary. All the Turks were gone in three days! The *Panaghia* had sent them away.

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[2] Ps 83:1 (Ps 82:1 LXX).

[3] Ps 83:11-12 (Ps 82: 12-13 LXX), see also Judges 7-8.

God will throw out whatever is not right, just as the eye gets rid of a foreign body. Satan may be working, but God is working, too, and He will turn evil into good. Take broken tiles. God can take them and turn them into a beautiful mosaic. So don't worry, God is above everything and everyone, governing all things, and will call on each of us to account for our actions, and we will each receive our just reward. Those who aided others will be

rewarded and those who caused harm will be punished. Ultimately, God will order things aright, but each one of us will have to account for what we did during these difficult years, with our prayers and kindnesses.

Faith is under attack today. The stones of faith are being removed one by one to bring down the edifice. But we're all responsible for this destruction, not just those who remove the stones and destroy the building, but also those of us who sit back and watch the building fall and do nothing to shore it up. Whoever pushes someone toward evil will be held accountable to God. But our neighbour will also be held accountable for seeing this evil done to a fellow human being and for doing nothing about it.

People will easily believe someone who has the gift of persuasion.

– People, Geronda, are like wild beasts.

– I have no complaints against wild beasts. You see, animals cannot do much harm as they lack the ability to think, whereas a man who wanders far from God becomes worse than the wildest beast! He can do so much damage. The strongest vinegar is made from spoiled wine; the other, artificial vinegars are not as strong. The worst of all is when the devil forms an alliance with a perverse human being; that's when he can do twice as much harm. Just like carnal thoughts; when they ally themselves with the flesh, they do the greatest harm to the flesh. For the devil to work with such a person, he must be of some importance; he, too, must have evil intentions and be evil himself.

Then, God forbid, these people will cause great harm; they'll threaten others, harm monasteries. The Church and Monasticism will be a threat to them because they'll upset their plans. The present situation can only be confronted spiritually, not in a worldly manner. The storm will worsen, discarding more trash and junk, but then everything will be sorted out. That's when you'll see some receiving their fair share and others paying their debt. Things will work out in such a way that no one will be complaining over the misfortunes they will experience, but, needless to say, neither will they be saying, *Glory be to You, O God.*

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[4] *Panaghia* is a Greek word meaning "All Holy". It is one of the epithets bestowed upon the Virgin Mary by the Greek Orthodox Church, and is used as a proper name prevailing over others.

O how God truly loves us! The things that are going on now,[5] and the things people are planning on doing, if they had occurred twenty years earlier, when people had greater spiritual ignorance, the situation would have been far worse. Now people are more aware; the Church has become stronger. God loves people, they're His creation, and He will provide for all their needs, as long as they believe and observe His commandments.

"Cursed Is the Man Who Does the Work of the Lord With Slackness"[6]

In the old days, if a believer worried about the state of the world, he was thought not to be right in the head and was destined for confinement in the Tower.[7] Today it's just the opposite; a believer is destined for confinement in the Tower if he's not concerned for and doesn't feel pain over the prevailing conditions in the world. You see, in the old days, those who governed the world had God in them, whereas today many of those who govern have no faith at all. Nowadays, many of them are trying to destroy everything, the family, youth, the Church.

selves

Today, when one is concerned over the condition of our nation, then that's a confession of faith in itself, because the State is opposing the divine law. It's legislating laws that are contrary to the law of God.

There are also some who are completely indifferent; they don't believe in the Church and they don't recognize the Nation, either. To have their peace of mind, they say "Saint Paul himself teaches that one should not be concerned about the affairs of the world," and they just don't care! But that's not what Saint Paul meant. During his time, the pagan nations were in power. Some people severed their ties from the State and turned to Christ. Since they had become soldiers of Christ at a time when the whole world was pagan, Saint Paul's message was: Don't get involved in affairs of the State.[8] However, when Saint Constantine the Great came to power and Christianity prevailed, the great Christian tradition was gradually established through the Churches, the monasteries, and through art, the rule of faith and worship, and so on. As such, we have a responsibility to maintain all of these traditions and not allow the enemies of the Church to abolish them. I have even heard Spiritual Fathers advising their spiritual children, "Don't get involved in affairs of the State!" Now if they had attained such a high level of sanctity through prayer that they didn't care about anything worldly, then I would be the first to kiss their feet. But they're only indifferent, they don't want to rock the boat.

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[5] These words were spoken in June of 1985.

[6] Jer 48:10 (Jer 31:10 LXX).

[7] A tall defensive structure built into the monasteries of the Holy Mountain and used to ward off pirates.

[8] Cf. 2 Tim 2:4.

Indifference is unacceptable even among worldly people, and even less so among spiritual people. An honourable, spiritual person should do nothing indifferently. The Prophet Jeremiah exhorts us by saying, *Cursed is he who does the work of the Lord with slackness.*[9]

Let Us Give Spiritual Comfort to the People

In the old days, six out of ten people were truly God-fearing, two somewhat so and the other two indifferent, but even they still had some faith in them. Today it's not like that. I don't know where this is all going. But I do know that we must now try to help people spiritually with all our might, just like in the old days, during the great flood, with Noah's Ark, we must now try to save some from being spiritually maimed. This has to be done with great care. It will take a lot of discernment to see things from many points of view and try to comfort people spiritually. Do you think it's of any comfort to me to have so many people coming to my door, or that I want to see so many people? No, I don't, but under these conditions these poor people need a little help. The reason I didn't become an ordained priest was so that I wouldn't have to deal with people, but now I'm far more involved with them. Yet, God knows my disposition and gives me far more now than He would have if I were only to do what suited me. Often I have asked *Panaghia* to provide for me a faraway and peaceful place, where I wouldn't see or hear anything, where I could pray for the whole world, but She won't listen. But when I pray for insignificant things, *Panaghia* does listen to my prayer.

I realize that now, when I am about to have to see a lot of people, God nails me down with an illness so I can get some rest. He doesn't give me that sweetness of prayer I used to have in the past, because, if He did, I wouldn't be able to pull myself away. When I had it, it was very difficult for me to pull myself out of that spiritual condition when someone came to my *Kalyvi.*[10]

There in the *Kalyvi* I become a program for the people. As I'm inside reading the Psalter, they're outside knocking on the door. I tell them, "In fifteen minutes," and they shout, "Hey, Father, stop praying for a minute! God won't be offended if you do!" That's how far they go! It's not only that I'll interrupt my prayer, but if I go outside it's all over. I have to manage to finish all I can before then. By six-thirty in the morning I have to have finished even my daily Vespers, in order to manage. So for me it's like *O morning light of the holy glory*! By the time you finish your Orthros, I'm already all done with the *komboschoinia*[11] of the Vespers. If I get a chance to have some *antidoron* in the morning, all's well and good; afterwards I can't even get a cup of tea, I'm dead, ready to

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[9] Jer 48:10 (Jer 31:10 LXX)

[10] The Elder, following an intense spiritual experience of his love for God and man, felt himself melting like a candle in a warm place. He then realized that he could not refuse his help to others. From then on, he devoted the daytime to the people who came to visit him, while at night-time he was devoted in prayer ~~for~~ to the various problems of the world. However, when the number of the faithful who came to visit him increased dramatically, he thought of retiring to unknown places where he could devote all his time to prayer. Then, for a second time, he received the call to remain in his *Kellion* dedicated to *Panagouda (little Panaghia)*, and to provide spiritual comfort to the people.

[11] *Komboschoini* (pl. *komboschoinia*) is the black woollen prayer rope with knots used by Orthodox Christians to recite the Jesus Prayer.

collapse. Even during Bright Week after Pascha I had to observe the Ninth Hour and the three-day rule.[12] Whether you can or not, you must do it. One day, I don't know what obstacles people faced, maybe there was a storm at sea and there was no boat, but no one showed up at the *Kalyvi*. Oh my, I had a day like those I used to have on Mount Sinai when I lived in the cave of Saint Episteme![13] So, you see, when the sea has a storm, I have calm; but when the sea is calm, then I have a "storm".

I could, of course, go somewhere on retreat. Do you know how many have offered to cover the expenses and send me to California, or to Canada? "You must come," they say, "we have an Hesychasterion there." If I should find myself in an unfamiliar place, it would be like I was in Paradise. Nobody will know me, and I will have my rule to live as a monk, as I desire. But you see, a soldier is discharged only after the war is over. Now we are at war, in a spiritual war. I must stay at the front lines. There are Marxists, Masons, satanists, and so many others! There are so many who are possessed by demons, anarchists, suffering from delusions, and they come to me asking me to "bless" their beliefs! And there are so many sent to me by others without any preparation, some only to get rid of them, and others so that they won't be the ones to pull the chestnuts out of the fire... If you only knew how hard pressed I am from so many directions! I'm so embittered by others' pain. But I feel consolation in my heart. If I were to go away, I'd see it as a retreat, abandoning the front line. It would be a betrayal. That's how I see it. It's not as if I set out to do these things or help the monasteries. I started out for one thing, and now I find myself doing something else, and how must I struggle! And you see, no one else is reacting. Who cares if people are trying to destroy the Church. They'll tell you, "Oh, it doesn't matter!" They're like feathers in the wind, so long as they are comfortable. How can they possibly be comfortable? They'll be made comfortable by Satan in the end. These are not honourable things. If I wanted to do what pleases me, well, you know how easy that would be. But the point is not to do what pleases me, but to do what pleases and brings consolation to others. If I were to think about my own ease and comfort, I could find a myriad of places and ways of doing that. But in order to enter the will of God, you have to be a doer of God's will, and not merely a servant of yourself.

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[12] Abstention from food and drink until the Ninth Hour (3:00 p.m. by the Byzantine reckoning), or for three days.

[13] The Elder lived an ascetic life in the cave of Saint Episteme on Mount Sinai during the years 1962–1964.

PART ONE

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF LOVE

"The way of the Church is love;
this differs from the manner of the legalists.
The Church sees everything with forbearance
and seeks to help each person, no matter
what he may have done, no matter
how sinful he may be."

CHAPTER ONE

The Indifferent Generation

Indifference to God Breeds Indifference to Everything

What's that noise?

– It's an aeroplane, Geronda.

– Close the window, we don't want it coming in! The world has gone so mad even that could happen!... Everything's falling apart, family, education, public services... People don't care about anything! They are empty...

– Whose fault is it that we have come to this?

– I'm speaking in general terms; I just want to show you how indifferent people are. Go to any school and you'll see. For example, if open windows are banging in the wind, it's doubtful that even one child will care enough to shut them so they don't break. Some will gape, some will just sit back and watch them rattle, while others will merely pass by as if nothing is happening. Indifference! An army officer who was in charge of the oil depot used to tell me, "I'm having a hard time finding a soldier to place on guard duty at the depot, one who will be responsible enough to keep others from starting a fire or be sure that he himself won't throw a cigarette."

There is a half-hearted spirit, no manliness at all. We have completely gone bad! I wonder how God tolerates us! There was so much dignity in the old days! There was *philotimo*! During the war in 1940, at the frontier, the Italians would sometimes have an encounter with the Greek guards and would visit their guard post. And to see the *philotimo* of the Greeks! Once when the Italians went to a Greek guard post, the Greeks offered them some coffee. One of the Greek officers took a handful of money out of his pocket, fifty and hundred drachma notes – and this money was worth something back then – and he set them on fire in order to boil the coffee. He wanted to show the Italians that Greece was a rich country! The Italians were impressed. See the spirit of sacrifice!

Nowadays we have been permeated by a spirit that one finds in communist countries. In Russia, even though they had an abundant crop this year,[1] there will be great hunger among the people. They did not harvest the grain on time; they went to harvest in the autumn. Is harvesting ever done in autumn? But if the crop is not their own, how can they ache enough for it to go and harvest? Their life is a drudgery. They don't have the drive to go and create something, because for so many years they were not free to create. There it goes, with an idle spirit, with this indifference, the whole country is sinking. Is it raining and the wheat is spread out? They don't care. Is it time to leave work? They leave work. The rain washes the harvested wheat away. The next day they will go to work on time to gather what is left of it! But when the wheat is your own and it's spread out on the threshing floor, if it should rain, would you ever leave it to be lost? No, you lose your sleep in order to save it. And, even though you're so very tired, you feel joy, you feel delight.

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[1] This was stated in 1990.

Indifference towards God leads to indifference towards everything else; it leads to disintegration. Faith in God is so very important. When man worships God then he loves his parents too, and his home, his relatives, his work, his village, his whole region, his State, his fatherland. One who does not love God or his family isn't capable of loving anything; and, of course, he doesn't love his country either, which after all is but one big family. What I'm trying to say is that everything stems from faith in God. When a person does not believe in God, he doesn't care about his family, his village, or his country either. And all of these values are now falling apart, and this is why there is a spirit of idleness and indifference. A police officer wrote to me, "I couldn't come because I had a lot of work to do. There's only two of us covering an area that is supposed to be covered by eight." You see what's happening? Instead of assigning two more policemen, they're leaving only two!

Fortunately, there are exceptions. Once a father came to me and said, "Pray for my son Angelo because they're going to kill him." I had known his son, who was serving in the military at the time, since childhood. "Why, what's wrong?" I asked him. He said, "He found the others playing cards when they should have been on duty. He reprimanded them; they didn't listen. Then he went to report them and one of them threatened to kill him." "Look," I said, "they're not going to kill him, so don't worry about that. But I will pray for Angelo so they do not court-martial him for not playing cards with the others!"

I learned something else and said, "Glory be to God, there are still some Greeks who care about their country." An air force pilot had attempted to overtake some Turkish planes which had violated Greek air space, to take pictures in order to prove it. The others from the ground radio communications told him, "Let them go, don't bother." But he insisted and kept trying to overtake them. In the meantime, the Turkish pilot with the bigger aeroplane was flying faster and lowered his altitude, leading the poor Greek pilot to fall into the sea! And there are others who simply fly around in their aeroplane! What a difference!

One has to grasp the real meaning, to have a need to do what is good and right, otherwise all is idleness and indifference. You can't possibly force someone to go fight in a war! He'll be looking for ways to run rather than fight. But once he understands what harm the enemy can do, then he'll volunteer to go.

People Today Are So Self-Centred

In the old days in Pharasa, my homeland, people used to say, "If you have some work that needs doing, don't leave it for tomorrow. If you have some good food, save it for tomorrow when a visitor might come." Nowadays people think, "Let's leave work for tomorrow, when someone might come to help us, and let's eat the good food tonight!" Today, most people are self-centred. They think only of themselves. Let's say it starts raining very heavily. You'll see that most of you will start thinking of

whether you have laundry hanging on the clothesline and will hurry out to pick it up. This is not a bad thing, but our thoughts do not go any further. Even if they get wet, the clothes will dry again. But what about those people threshing their harvest? Do you feel for them, offer them a prayer? Or, when lightning strikes; it is doubtful if a handful of people will think of the farmers or those who have greenhouses.

People do not think of others, they don't go beyond themselves; their thoughts constantly revolve around themselves. But when they revolve around themselves, they have themselves at the centre, not Christ. They function outside the axis which is Christ. In order to be able to think of others, the mind must first be with Christ. Then one can also consider the neighbour, the animals and all of nature. His radio station is working and, as soon as a message is received, he runs to help. If our mind is not on Christ, the heart is not working, and, as such, we love neither Christ nor our fellow human beings, not to mention nature, the animals, the trees, the plants.

By living this way, you will never reach the point of having communication with the animals, the birds! If a bird were to fall from the roof, you would feed it. But if it does not fall from the roof, you do not think about feeding it. When I look at the birds, I say to myself, "The poor birds need to be fed," and I throw some crumbs, I leave out some water. I see diseased branches on the trees and I immediately think of cutting them off, so the rest of the tree doesn't get infected. Even when a door or a window is banging, that's where my thought goes. I will forget myself, if I should be needing something at that moment, and will tend to the door or the window, so that they will not be damaged. I might think of myself as an afterthought. And if someone thinks and cares about the other creatures, how much even more must he think and care about their Creator! If man does not live like this, how will he ever communicate with God?

Even when you simply go out, take a look around. Someone may have carelessly or maliciously – and I do hope no one would do that – thrown something to cause a fire. So take a look around. This, too, is a spiritual act, for even a glance can bear love. When I come out of my *Kalyvi*, I take a look downwards and I take a look up towards the roof to see if something is burning. Unless, of course, one has such faith that if something does catch fire, prayer alone will put out the fire. Otherwise, one must take action. Also, if I hear an explosion, I pay close attention to see what it is. Is it a gun? Are they practising? Is it a blasting-charge? My mind runs immediately to such concerns so that I may direct my prayer with the *komboschoini*. One who disregards himself, out of love for others, will have the great care of God, and all people will care for him.

But today's generation is the generation of indifference! Most people are only for the parades! If something were to happen, don't even try telling them to defend themselves! And nowadays they don't like parades either! In the past, at least, people would go to the parades, listen to a marching tune, and something would stir inside them! Today, we Greeks are idle and lack discipline. Of course, other nations are even worse, without any ideals. You see, the Greeks may have a whole lot of faults and blemishes in their character, but they have one gift from God: *philotimo* and *leventia* (bravery). They celebrate

everything. Other nations do not even have these words in their vocabulary.

We Have a Responsibility[2]

An atheist to the bone had come to my *Kalyvi* once. After going on and on, he finally told me, "You know, I am an iconoclast." He believed in nothing and yet he claimed to be an iconoclast. So I told him, "You godless fellow, how can you talk to me about being an iconoclast, when you believe in nothing? At the time of the Iconoclastic Controversy,[3] some Christians fell into error through excessive zeal and went to the other extreme, but then the Church resolved the issue; it was never a matter of not believing in God." He then went on to support the present situation. And then I really became angry with him. "How can the present situation be acceptable to you?" I told him. "Judges afraid to judge; indictments against criminals withdrawn because someone or another threatens them. Who is running the country? Are you comfortable with this situation? If you support such people, you're a criminal yourself. Why did you come to me? Get out of here!" And I sent him away.

– Geronda, aren't you afraid to speak like that?

– What is there to be afraid of? I have already dug my grave. If I had not dug my own grave, then I would

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[2] This was related in 1992.

[3] Iconoclasts were those Christians who refused to render honour to the Icons. The Iconoclastic Controversy had thrust the Byzantine Empire into turmoil for more than a century (726-843). It was resolved at first by the 7th Ecumenical Council in 787, which condemned it as heresy. Rekindled by Emperor Leo V the Armenian, the controversy was finally settled by Patriarch Methodios in 843.

re work

be concerned about the person who would tire himself digging it. As it is now, someone only has to throw in a few shovelfuls of soil...

I have in mind another atheist, a blasphemer, who has said the most blasphemous things about Christ and *Panaghia,* one who is permitted to appear on television. Even the Church does not take a stand to excommunicate some of these people. Such people should be excommunicated, but the Church seems reluctant to do so!

– Geronda, what would be accomplished with an excommunication when these people do not believe in anything anyway?

– It will at least show that the Church has taken a stand on the matter.

– Geronda, is the silence of the Church an indication of approval?

– Yes. Someone wrote some blasphemous things about *Panaghia* and no one spoke up. Then I told someone, "Did you see what so-and-so has written?" And he told me, "Well, what can you do with those people? You'll get soiled if you try to deal with them." They're afraid to speak up.

– What did he have to fear, Geronda?

– That people might write something about him and ridicule him in the press. And so he tolerates blasphemous things about *Panaghia*! We want others to pull the chestnuts out of the fire so that we can have our peace of mind. This indicates a lack of love. Then man begins to act out of self-interest. This is why we see an all-too-familiar spirit today: "Get to know so-and-so because he will then speak well of you. Be on good terms with so-and-so and he will not speak badly of you, and so forth.

After all, we must not be taken for fools, we must not become victims." Another person remains indifferent and does not speak up. "I do not speak out," he says, "so that I won't be written up in the newspapers." In other words, most people are completely indifferent. For a long time no one would write anything, but now some little effort is being made. Years ago I had scolded someone on the Holy Mountain. "You are over-patriotic!" he retorted. Not too long ago he came back to find me and say "They have destroyed everything, family, education..." And I, in turn, told him, "You are over-patriotic!"

This whole situation has led to one bad thing and one good thing. The bad thing is that indifference has overtaken so many people, people who used to have something in them, but who now just say, "Who am I to solve the situation?" The good thing is the many people who are beginning to be troubled and to change for the better. Some even come to me and seek to justify a bad thing they did previously because they are now troubled by it.

– Geronda, are we then always to confess our faith?

– Discernment is needed. There are times when we should not speak out, and other times when we should confess our faith with courage, otherwise we will bear a responsibility for not speaking out. During these difficult years each one of us must do whatever is humanly possible; whatever is not humanly possible, leave it to God. This way we will have a clear conscience that we did what we could. If we do not resist these evil things, our ancestors will rise up from their graves against us. They endured so many hardships for the homeland and what are we doing for it? Greece, Orthodox Christianity, with her Sacred Tradition, her Saints and heroes, is under attack by the Greeks themselves, and we do not speak out! It is a terrible thing! I told someone, "Why don't you speak out against what so-and-so is saying?" And he replied, "What can one say; that person is totally depraved!" "If he is totally depraved, all the more reason to speak out and strike him down." They do nothing, they let him go on with his depravity. I actually spat at one of the politicians in disdain. "Say, at least, that you do not agree. Be forthright. Your attitude is that as long as you're all right, everything else can be ruined."

If Christians do not confess their faith, if they do not react, such people will do even worse things. But if they react, then they'll think twice about it. But I suppose many Christians nowadays are not made for battles. The early Christians were tough nuts; they transformed the world. And during the Byzantine period, if even one Icon was removed from the Churches, the people rose up in protest. Here Christ was crucified so that we may be resurrected, and we remain indifferent! If the Church does not speak up so as to avoid a conflict with the State, if the metropolitans do not speak up in order to be on good terms with everybody – and especially with those who help them with the church foundations, if the monks of the Holy Mountain do not speak up for fear of losing their subsidies,[4] who is going to speak up? I told one of the abbots, "If they threaten to cut off your subsidy, tell them, 'We will then no longer provide hospitality to the pilgrims,' so they will think twice about that." The professors of theology also do not speak out against these abuses. They reason: "We are civil servants; we will lose our salary and how are we then to live?" In the meantime, the monasteries have been caught up with the pensions. Why do you suppose that I do not want to receive even the small pension from the farmers' insurance fund (O.G.A.)? It is not honourable for a monk to be insured as a farmer. To be insured as an indigent, yes, I can see that; it honours the monk. But to be insured as a farmer – why? A monk has disclaimed fat pensions, abandoned the world and come to the monastery, to receive a pension? We betray Christ for a mere pension!

– Geronda, is it acceptable for a nun, who may have worked as a teacher for some years, to receive her rightful pension?

– Well, that's all right. But let me tell you, by giving this pension where it is needed, the nun will receive a good "pension" from Christ.

I See What Awaits Us and I Am Troubled

The years pass, and what difficult years they are! Our troubles are not over. The cauldron is boiling. If one is not strengthened spiritually, how can one face a difficult situation? God has not created human beings who are good for nothing. We must cultivate our *philotimo*. Indeed, if a great shake-up were to come upon us, God forbid, how many would remain standing?

Before the 1940 war, in Konitsa, where I had the carpentry shop near the market place, the villagers used to bring corn and wheat and so on. When these villagers would bring their corn to sell at the market, some wealthy people – who were not really wealthy, but they did earn a small interest on their deposited money – would kick the sack and disinterestedly ask how much it cost. But when war came and they had to sell everything they owned in order to survive, these same people would come to the market and when the villager said "Good morning", they would ask, "Have you any corn to sell?"

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[4] The Elder is referring here to the financial aid provided by the Greek State to the Monasteries of the Holy Mountain each year, since 1924, in exchange for their lands which were granted to the refugees who came to Greece after the Asia Minor catastrophe.

This is why you should thank God for all things. Tighten your belts a little and become frugal. I see what awaits us and I am troubled. Do not allow yourselves to get slack. Have you any idea what Christians are going through in other places?[5] In Russia they are still in labour camps. What hardships they have to endure! There are no books for spiritual edification. And what about poor Albania and the great misfortune there? They don't even have anything to eat. Churches and Monasteries have all been shut down. People even had to change their names so they don't sound Christian. Even in America, the Orthodox Christians are few and scattered in different places. Do you know what they're going through? Without an Orthodox community, they have to take the train miles and miles away just to go to Church. Some come to the Holy Mountain to seek spiritual guidance. It is great ingratitude on our part to have such an enervate spirit prevailing in Greece.

God will reveal many Saints in the countries where Communism was in power! Martyrs, who chose death. They held important positions but could not agree with laws contrary to the law of God. "I cannot agree with this, kill me, throw me into prison," they would say, so that the others would not also be mislead. Here in our country, without having to, so many are showing such great indifference! It would be different if they were going through some hardships, a war, or difficult years. But now, it's as if nothing is going on. How should one say this? It's like someone arriving from Australia by aeroplane to Greece in the springtime and then departing for Australia in autumn, only to arrive there in springtime again. They go from spring to spring, with no winter in sight, no sense of cold and heavy weather.

– Geronda, how can we help a person who is indifferent?

– We need to instil in him the good concern, the good restlessness, perturb him so that he'll want to do something to help himself. It cannot be done by force. A person must be thirsty before you can give him water. Try giving food to someone who isn't hungry; he will throw up. When the other person does not want something, I cannot deprive him of his freedom, his free will.

Ignorance Is Not Justifiable

– Geronda, is it possible that some people are indifferent because they are simply ignorant and uninformed?

– What ignorance? Let me tell you about a case of ignorance. A literature teacher from Chalkidiki did not know what the Holy Mountain is. A German teacher spoke to him about the Holy Mountain and they came together for a visit. The German man even knew how many monasteries there are on the Holy Mountain. And even though a Protestant, he also knew about the sacred Relics and where each one was. Now, is such ignorance justifiable among our people? Another person from America advised someone from Chalkidiki again to come to me for help with a problem he was having. From America, mind you! Let me tell you something else. Someone came to my *Kalyvi* from Florina. I asked him, "Are you from within Florina?" And he said, "Yes, from within the city." So I told him, "You have a very good Metropolitan there." Then he asked me, "What football team does he play with?" He thought that I was talking about a football player. He was so immersed in the game of football that he didn't even know the local bishop – at least Augustine Kantiotes is a well-known Bishop. Such ignorance is not justifiable.

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[5] It was stated in 1987.

Met. Augustinos

No, ignorance cannot be justified in the world today. What is missing is *philotimo*, the good disposition. He who has the good disposition of coming to know Christ will ~~come~~ to know Him. He will make a turn and come to meet Him. And even if there is not a theologian or a monk to teach him the word of God, as long as he has good disposition he will make the turn to Christ either from an encounter with a snake, or a wild beast, or from a lightning, from a storm, or some other event in his life. God will provide the means.

A young anarchist had gone to Germany. There he was confined to a reformatory because he had gotten involved with drugs. He had no help from anyone. In the reformatory someone gave him a New Testament. He read it and immediately changed. He said, "I will go to Greece, that's where Orthodoxy is." He returned to his village, and his relatives were intent on finding him a wife. He got married and had a child. He continued to read the New Testament, go to Church, observe the fasts and the feasts.

The others who saw him live like that said, "He must have gone crazy to be reading the New Testament!" After a while his wife abandoned him and took the child with her. When his wife left him, he left everything he had in the village, fields, tractor, and so on and went to live as an ascetic in a cave. A Spiritual Father however advised him to go find his wife first, talk with her and then decide what to do. So he set out for Thessaloniki to find his wife and child. He believed, since the Spiritual Father so advised him, that Christ would reveal her. Christ did not reveal his wife in Thessaloniki. In the meantime, he found some Germans and instructed them in the faith. One of them was baptized. The Germans paid the fare for the young man to go to Athens to seek his wife there. But he did not find her there either. Again, someone helped him go to Crete. He started working there and went to see a Spiritual Father. When the Spiritual Father heard his problem, he told him, "Is your wife and child like this, like that; there is a woman working here who arrived recently." And he described the woman to him. "She must be the one," the young man said. The Father informed her and as soon as she looked upon her husband, she exclaimed, "How did you find me? Are you a sorcerer? Did you find me with the help of sorcery?" She turned away and left him again before they could even begin to talk. He lost her for a second time.

He heard about me and came to my *Kalyvi*. He knocked once and waited. He stood to the side doing prostrations until I would open the door. He was wearing old and worn clothing. He told me the whole story. I had some dry figs and offered them to him. "Do you want some figs?" I asked him. "I have no teeth," he replied. "I don't have any either," I told him. "Are you in pain?" he asked me and added, "I am in pain, and out of pain comes the joy of Christ." I asked him again, "Do you want a sweater?" "I have two," he said, "and if the weather warms up I will give one away to someone." Then I told him, "Until you clear up the situation with your wife, you must take care of your health because you have a responsibility to your child too." Such self-denial, such faith that young man had! He wasn't yet twenty-seven years old. Imagine if he had come to know the monastic life! He had total ignorance, but he also had a good disposition and God helped him to make profound evangelical progress.

This is why I say that ignorance cannot be justified in any way today. Only if someone is mentally deficient or a small child can he be justified for being ignorant. But then again, even little children today are so bright! If one really wants to, there are many opportunities to learn the truth.

CHAPTER TWO

The Presence of a Christian Is a Confession of Faith

Geronda, do the various movements, demonstrations and protests carried out by Christians have any positive results?

– The presence of Christians is now a confession of faith. Someone may be of more help through prayer, but his silence will be exploited by others who'll say, "So and so did not protest, therefore he is on our side, he agrees with us." If some of us do not begin to strike back at evil, to reproach those who scandalize the faithful, greater harm will be done. The faithful will be somewhat encouraged, and at the same time those who are attacking the Church will be somewhat hindered. The Church is not their boat to go sailing with; it is the ark of Christ. And those who attack the Church are censurable. They are only interested in having big salaries, expensive cars, and entertainment... And then they make laws for civil marriages, they legalize abortions... As to what God will do, that is another matter.

And with the blasphemous movies being produced these days, they want to ridicule Christ. Essentially, they are saying "That's who Christ was, but now will come the real Messiah." Then they go on to present their own "Messiah". This is what they seem to be aiming at.

– People, Geronda, believe these things and are harmed!

– Those already harmed are harmed all the more. People believe these things because they want to justify the unjustifiable and to ease their conscience. With all this blasphemy they are seeking to justify moral and spiritual disorders. They have overdone it. They filed a lawsuit against the movie, *The Last Temptation of Christ,*[1] as being blasphemous to the Christian religion, and the public prosecutors said, "Oh, it is nothing." Such blasphemies had not been heard before! For us the protest against that blasphemous movie was a confession of faith. Of course, with all these blasphemous things there also comes a good thing: the wheat is separated from the chaff, people are passed through the sieve.

– Geronda, are there issues which we as individuals or as groups should defend, and other issues which we should not? When you, for example, were called a heretic, you responded, but with other criticisms you kept silent.

– This is the consensus of the Holy Fathers,[2] and not my own opinion. Any other accusation helps me in the spiritual life, while the accusation of being a heretic separates me from Christ.

People Are Being Lulled to Sleep

– Geronda, with everything that is going on in the world today, how can people get some help?

– The one who really desires to be helped can indeed be helped through insignificant things. For example, a vigil oil lamp is seen moving back and forth, or the person himself is shaken by an earthquake and he recovers from his indifference. But those who do not believe in the first place, become worse, when they hear that a war will break out or some catastrophe will take place. "Let's have a good time now," they reason, "life's too short." So they pull out all the stops. In the past even the indifferent ones would recover and change their way of life when a war was about to break out. Now such people are very few. In the past our nation lived spiritually, and God would bless it, and our Saints helped us overcome our enemies, who were always more numerous than us. Today we say that we are Orthodox Christians, but unfortunately we often only have the name Orthodox but not the orthodox way of life.

Once I asked a Spiritual Father who was active in society and had many spiritual children, "What do you know about a blasphemous movie?" "I know nothing about it," he told me. He knew nothing about it and yet was guiding so many people in a big city. People are being lulled to sleep. They want people in the dark, carefree and having a good time. One must not dare to speak about an impending war, or that we must prepare ourselves for the Second Coming. God forbid that we should cause the people to worry over such things! It is like some old ladies who say, "Don't talk about death; talk only of joyful things and baptisms..." As if death is not waiting for them too. So they have a false sense of joy. On the other hand, if they were to think about the aged man down the street who died yesterday, or the other one who has come to the end of his life and will soon die, or that a memorial service is being held the day after tomorrow for someone much younger than them, then they might be inclined to think about death and say, "I must go to confession, prepare myself spiritually, for Christ may call me soon to the other life." Otherwise, death in time will take them unprepared.

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[1] The blasphemous movie, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, directed by Martin Scorcese, was shown for a short while in the theatres of Athens in 1988. The storm of protests and demonstrations created by the faithful and the Church of Greece, forced the theatres to stop showing it. The Elder, in spite of the pain he endured from his hernia, came out of the Holy Mountain together with other monks to be present at the demonstration in Thessaloniki and to support the faithful people with his presence.

[2] See *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Abba Agathon 5, p. 18 translated by Benedicta Ward, Mowbrays, London & Oxford, 1977.

Some others again, out of supposed "kindness", give the following advice: "Don't tell the heretics that they are in error, to show them love." So, everything is levelled. If these people had lived during the early years of Christianity, we wouldn't have had a single Saint. In those years Christians were told, "Just throw some incense in the fire for the emperor and do not deny Christ." And they would not accept this. "Just pretend you're throwing incense." Again, they refused. "Don't talk about Christ and go quietly to some other area." Again, they did not accept any compromise. But today one sees so many lukewarm people.

– Geronda, when the Apostle Paul writes, *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy...*;[3] does he mean that joy is an indication of a proper life?

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[3] Gal 5:22.

– Yes, because there is worldly joy and divine joy. When something is not spiritual, pure, there cannot be true joy and peace in the heart. The joy experienced by a spiritual person is not the worldly joy sought by many today. Let's not mix things up. Did the Saints have the kind of joy we are seeking today? Did *Panaghia* have such joy? Did Jesus go around laughing? Which Saint has gone through this life without pain? Which Saint had the joy sought by many present-day Christians who do not want to hear anything unpleasant, who do not want to worry or lose their serenity? If I do not want to worry or be troubled so that I may be happy, if I do not want to lose my serenity so that I may be meek, then I am indifferent! Spiritual meekness and meekness out of indifference are two different things. Some people say, "I must be cheerful because I am a Christian. I must be calm because I am a Christian." Such people are not Christians. Do you understand? That is indifference, it is worldly joy. One who has these worldly elements is not a spiritual person. A spiritual person is a mass of pain. That is to say, a spiritual person is pained over circumstances, over people, but is compensated for this pain by divine consolation. He does feel pain, but inside he also feels divine consolation, for God is pouring blessings from Paradise and man is overjoyed with divine love. This is the joy, the spiritual joy, which is not expressed but, rather, abounds in the heart.

The Example Speaks

– Geronda, should people living a spiritual life in the world let others know that they are fasting?

– When it is a matter of the prescribed times of fasting, such as Wednesdays, Fridays, and the other Lenten seasons, then we should, because it is a confession of faith. The other ascetic fasts, that is those which are undertaken for the love of Christ or for our prayer of petition to be heard, those should be practised in secret.

Our goal is to live in an Orthodox way, not simply to speak or to write in an Orthodox way. This is why, you see, a sermon does not inform, does not change the life of a person, no matter how good it is, unless the preacher is actually living the faith.

– Geronda, what happens if the one who hears or reads a sermon has a good and open disposition?

– Well, then he already has divine Grace, and that's why he can benefit from such a sermon. One who does not have this good disposition, however, will take and examine what the preacher is saying and will not receive any spiritual benefit from it. It is relatively easy to *think* in an Orthodox way; to *live* the Orthodox way of life requires effort.

Once a theologian gave a talk urging people to go and donate blood because there was a shortage. And, indeed, many were motivated to go and donate blood. However, he himself did not donate even a single drop, even though he had plenty. The people were then scandalized. But he responded by saying, "By speaking to the people and motivating them to donate blood, counts as if I had given much more!" Thus he was able to ease his conscience. It would have been better if he had not given the talk but gone to donate a little blood of his own. One's life is what counts. "I am a rightist," someone told me who had no relationship with the Church whatsoever. "If you do not even make the sign of the Cross, how can that be of benefit to you?" I told him. "A hand that does not make the sign of the Cross has no particular benefit for being the right hand. How does it differ from the left hand that does not make the sign of the Cross?" If you are a rightist and you do not make the sign of the Cross, how do you differ from the leftists? The goal is to be a spiritual person, living close to Christ, then you can be helpful to others as well.

When a person lives aright, then his work will inform others. A certain Protestant lived in a city and was critical of everybody – the clergy, the bishops, everyone without exception. Not far from there, a certain monk lived an ascetic life in a monastery. At one point an atheist asked the Protestant, "All right, you criticize all the bishops and all the clergy. What do you have to say about that monk?" "Him I accept," he said, "because he differs from the others." A faithful person who lives authentically will be of benefit to others, no matter where he may be. I remember a friend of mine who served as a policeman on the northern borders. In the area there were some Serb communists who were real atheists and committed members of the party. When Serb priests came to the Greek-Serbian border, the policeman would kiss their hand. The communists noticed this: a Greek policeman was kissing the hand of Serb priests! This made an impression upon the communists and they reconsidered the issue of faith.

How helpful are those people who have an important position and uphold the faith and traditions! This is why I try to see some important people when they come to me; I want to help them, because they in turn can help others with their good example. There is a field marshal

I know who is such an example. Whatever he does is from within, from the heart, not superficial. Others who observe his way of life question themselves and are benefited. In the past, the local leaders had principles, they believed. Do you know what a prominent lady had said to a parliamentarian in a city?

She had attended a dinner with her husband during the Dormition Fast and there was fish and meat on the table. She wasn't eating because she was keeping the fast. The parliamentarian noticed her and made the familiar remark, *The sick and the travellers need not keep the fast*. "Oh yes, especially those travelling with ease in their car!" she replied and did not touch any of the non-Lenten food. Meanwhile, there was also a clergyman at the same dinner who addressed the group by saying, "It is my honour to be here with you this evening..." and going on and on with endless praises and compliments. At one point the clergyman was interrupted by the husband of the notable lady with an appropriate verse from the Psalms, *Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.*[4] The clergyman had obviously gone there to flatter the guests. On another occasion the same lady had said to a university professor of Theology, "Please do not fuss too much over minor details and fail the priests in their examinations. Try to help them pass their examinations because there is such a great need for priests in the countryside." The point I want to make is that, in the past, local officials and leading members of our society were interested in the Church and served as an example for the people.

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[4] Ps 146:3 (Ps 145:3 LXX).

What will have a positive impact on people today is our Christian example and our Christian life. Christians should be distinguished by spiritual heroism, nobility, sacrifice. This is why I tell lay people, "Love Christ, be humble, do your duty, and Christ Himself will reveal your virtue to others." Virtue has a rule of its own by which it will reveal a person wherever he may be. Even if one should conceal himself, or even pretend to be a fool for Christ's sake, virtue will definitely be revealed, even at a later time, and the stored treasure, revealed all together at last, will again help many souls; perhaps then even more.

God Endures Us

Today God is tolerating the state of affairs. He tolerates and tolerates so that the evil doers will be unjustifiable. There are circumstances where God intervenes directly and immediately, while in others He waits; He does not provide the solution immediately and waits for the patience of the people, their prayer, their struggle. God demonstrates such nobility! There is one who had killed so many back then during the war, and yet he is still living. God will tell him in the other life, "I allowed you to live much longer than the devout people." He will be allowed no mitigating circumstances.

– Geronda, why is it that sometimes such people do not die, even though they are very sick?

– It seems they have some grave sins, and for this they do not die. God is waiting and giving them time to repent.

– What about the people they harm?

– The innocent who are harmed receive credit, but those who are guilty are paying off debts.

– Geronda, what is meant by the phrase, *Evil men and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived.*[5]

– Look, there are some people who have some egoism and God gives them a slap so that they will lower themselves a little. Others have a little more egoism and God gives them a slap so that they'll lower themselves even more. But those who have satanic pride, God leaves them alone. It may appear that they are prosperous, but what prosperity is that? It is a dismal prosperity. And afterwards, they do not simply fall down; they go directly into the abyss. God save us!

The Defence of Justice

– Geronda, one of the hymns says, *Arousing a most righteous anger.*[6] What anger is *most righteous*?

– When others are being wronged and someone shouts in anger out of a real sense of pain and suffering, then that is *a most righteous anger*. When he is angry because he is wronged, then that is not pure anger. When you see someone suffering for the sake of sacred things, he has divine zeal. This is how you can understand one who has become a fool for Christ. For example, if you take an Icon and place it upside down before him, the fool for Christ will react with great agitation. That's how you can put him to the test. In other words, there is a righteous, divine indignation, and only this indignation is justifiable in man. When Moses saw the people sacrificing to the golden calf, he got very angry and threw down the tablets of stone with the commandments given to him by God, and they broke.[7] Phineas, the grandson of the high priest Aaron, had committed two murders and yet God established a covenant whereby the perpetual priesthood of Israel would derive from him and his descendents! When he saw the Israelite man Zimri sinning with the Midianite woman Cozbi before Moses and all the Israelites, Phineas could not control himself; he rose and slew both of them, putting an end to God's anger. Had he not slain both of them, the wrath of God would have befallen all of the people of Israel.[8] What a fearful thing! When I read in the Psalter the verse *Then Phineas stood up and interposed, and the plague was stayed,*[9] I kiss his name many times. Even Christ Himself, when He saw in the Temple courtyard merchants selling calves, sheep, doves, and the money changers, took a whip and drove everybody out.[10]

When a spiritual person tries to defend himself indignantly in a personal matter, this is clearly selfish, an act of temptation. Such a person is subject to external demonic influences. If someone is being wronged or ridiculed, others should defend him, for the sake of justice, not for their own self-interest. It is not right for you to quarrel on your own behalf. It is, of course, another matter if you react to defend serious spiritual matters, matters that relate to our faith, to Orthodoxy. You have a responsibility to do this. When you are thinking of others and you react in order to help them, then this is a pure activity because it is prompted by love.

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[5] 2 Tim 3:13.

[6] A phrase in an Apostichon Hymn among the Praises for the Feast of the Holy Fathers for the First Ecumenical Council.

[7] Cf. Ex 32:1-20.

[8] Cf. Num 25:1-15.

[9] Ps 106:30 (Ps 105:30 LXX).

[10] Cf. Jn 2:14-15.

When I was at Mount Sinai, I would go down to the Monastery each week or every fifteen days to receive Holy Communion. One time, a very simple *Dikaios*[11] who was there told me, "Not every week; monks should receive Holy Communion only four times a year." At that time, they had a rule not to receive Holy Communion frequently. I used to wear the monastic hood. And he said, "No monastic hood, either." They only wore it during the feasts. I said, "May it be so, with your blessing." So I put it over my shoulder like a scarf and gave it no further thought. Was I to quarrel over this? In the meantime, I would prepare myself for Holy Communion and attend the Divine Liturgy. When the priest said, *With fear of God, faith and love draw near*, I would bend my head and say, "You know, my Jesus Christ, how much need I have for Holy Communion," and I would feel such a transformation, which I do not know that I would have felt had I received Holy Communion.

After a number of months passed, several young men came to the Monastery, urged by me to come to Mount Sinai. They, too, were told not to receive Holy Communion frequently. Well, then I spoke up and the matter was properly settled.

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[11] In the Holy Monastery of Mount Sinai, *Dikaios* is called the person responsible for the Holy Assembly when the Archbishop is not present in the Monastery.

Facing Up to Abusive Insults

– Geronda, Sacred Scripture says that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not forgiven.[12] What is this blasphemy?

– Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is in general disregard for holy and sacred things, provided, of course, the person is sane. Then he's guilty, too. For example, to one who told me, "Get out of here, you and your gods...," I gave a hard shove because that was blasphemy. Or two people are passing by a Church. One of them makes the sign of the cross and urges the other to do the same, but he resists, "I will not make the sign of the cross!" Such contempt is blasphemy. Thus it is impossible for blasphemy to exist in a devout person. But even impudence is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The impudent person distorts or disobeys, for example, an evangelical commandment in order to justify his fallen state. Such a person does not respect the truth, reality, but knowingly distorts it and tramples upon a sacred object or principle. Such an attitude gradually becomes constant. In time, the Grace of God is lost and the person is subject to demonic attacks. If he does not repent, oh, the consequences he is to bear... God forbid! But if one becomes angry and blasphemes even against the Holy Spirit, this blasphemy is not unforgivable; it is not something he actually believes, but something he said in a moment of anger when he had lost control, and immediately repents. The impudent, however, will justify the lie in order to justify his fall. Whoever justifies his fall, justifies the devil.

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[12] Cf. Mt 12:31.

– Geronda, how does someone justify his fall?

– A person may recall something said ten years ago in a very different context and present it as an example to justify himself. Not even the devil himself, the greatest legalist, could conjure up something like that at that moment.

– And how does such a person feel?

– How does he feel? He never has any rest. If even someone who is in the right does not find peace when attempting to justify himself, you can imagine the person who is not in the right and who is trying to justify his fall in a most impudent manner. For this reason, we must be careful to avoid any impudence and scorn, not only of sacred things but also of our neighbour, who is an image of God. Impudent people are at the first level of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Those who despise and scorn sacred and holy things are at the second level, and at the third level is the devil himself.

– Geronda, when people speak against the Church or against Monasticism, and so on, what should one do?

– First of all, if someone speaks badly about you as a person, this does not matter. Just remember: "Jesus, Who was God Himself, would not speak out when abused and reviled. What do I, who am a sinner, deserve?" If people came to abuse me as an individual, it would not trouble me at all. But when they abuse me as a monk, they also abuse the whole institution of Monasticism, for the monk is not independent, and therefore I must speak up. In such circumstances we should give people a little time to have their outburst and then tell them a few things.

Once a lady on the bus was being abusive about priests. I gave her time to have her say and when she had

finished I said, "We have expectations of our priests but we forget that God did not send them down to us with parachutes from Heaven. They are human beings with human weaknesses. But can you tell me, a mother like you, all painted up with cosmetics and fingernails like a hawk's, what kind of child will she bear and raise? And if this child were to become a priest or a monk, what will he be like?"

I remember on another occasion, when travelling from Athens to Yannena by bus, a man was talking incessantly about a metropolitan who had at that time created certain problems. I told him only two or three words and then continued to pray in silence. He just went on with his abuse. When we arrived in Yannena I took him aside and told him, "Do you know who I am?" "No," he said. "Then how can you say such things? I could be far worse than the person you are reviling, or I could be a saint. How can you sit there and say such terrible things which I cannot imagine even worldly people doing? Try to correct yourself from being so abusive to others, otherwise you will receive a strong slap from God; for your own sake, of course." After that, I noticed he began to tremble. Even the others around us understood, as I realized from the commotion that followed.

You see people abusing and reviling holy and sacred things and others not saying anything. Being meek on such an occasion is demonic. Once when I was coming out of the Holy Mountain, I met on the boat a poor man who had left a psychiatric hospital and come to the Holy Mountain. He was constantly ranting and cursing all the prominent people in government, at the hospital... "For so many years now they've worn me out with electric shocks and behaviour controlling drugs. You monks have it good here, with your comforts, your cars. From twelve years old my mother sent me to an island. For twenty-five years I have been going from one psychiatric clinic to another." He continued to blame all the political parties, and then he started being abusive of Christ and *Panaghia*. Then I got up, went to him, and said, "Stop, right now." Then I asked, "Are there no people in authority here?" Apparently his escort was offended – he must have been a policeman – and he calmed him down a little. He had expressed all his problems with loud abusive outbursts. I felt sorry for him. Later he came and kissed my hand. I, too, kissed him. He was right. All of us, more or less, have our share of responsibility. I, too, was in part the cause for this poor man's abusive talk. Had I had the necessary spirituality perhaps I could have made him well.

At the time of the exchange of populations following the Asia Minor catastrophe, the people of Pharasa were very sad on the boat bringing them to Greece. Two sailors were arguing and cursing Christ and *Panaghia*. This was unbearable to them. "Greeks, Christians, cursing Christ and *Panaghia*!" They grabbed the two sailors and threw them into the sea. Fortunately, they knew how to swim and were saved. When an ordinary person is being abused, we should support and defend him; how much more so when Christ Himself is reviled.

Once a young man who was lame came to my *Kalyvi*, but his face was aglow with an extraordinary light. I thought to myself, "Something is going on here for divine Grace to be so obvious!" I asked him how he was and he told me what had happened. Someone, a big and strong man, was abusive of Christ and *Panaghia*, and the young man rushed upon him to stop the abuse. But the abuser put the young man down and beat him, crippling him and leaving him lame. He was a confessor! O what suffering was endured by the Confessors and the Martyrs!

– Geronda, some devout young men are troubled while serving their military duty by those who are abusive and curse. What should they do?

– This requires discernment and patience. God will help. The wireless operator that I worked with in the army was a blasphemous, unbelieving doctor. Every day he would come to the administrative unit to brainwash me with his ideas! He talked to me about Darwin's theory of evolution, and other such things; things entirely blasphemous. But after a particular event, he began to understand a few things.

Once we were on a mission and we had loaded the wireless equipment and the carrier on a large mule. On a downhill and slippery path, I was holding on to the mule's tail and the doctor was pulling on the reigns. Suddenly, as the carrier slightly touched the animal's ears, the mule gave a strong kick with its hind legs and threw me with force to the side. As I recovered, I realized that I was still walking! The only thing I remember is shouting, "My *Panaghia*!" Nothing else. The mule's hoofs were imprinted on my body; my chest was all black and blue. The animal had kicked with such force! The doctor was very surprised to see me walking. We continued on our mission. A little further on the doctor lost his footing on a rock, fell and could not get up to walk. He started shouting, "My *Panaghia*, my Christ! What will become of me, who will help me?" He was afraid of being captured. "Don't worry," I told him, "I will stay with you; if they capture me, they'll capture you." The poor fellow then started thinking, "Arsenios,[13] even though the mule kicked him so hard and threw him flying, did not suffer a thing, while I, who merely lost my footing, am now unable to walk!" After a while, he got up with difficulty and I helped him as he limped. The others in the unit had moved ahead. The doctor got a good lesson that day. Every day he was spouting his blasphemies without restraint, and then, at a time of danger, he started shouting, "My *Panaghia*, my *Panaghia*!" *Panaghia* was now convenient for him! Another person, a motorcyclist in the army, had broken his leg twice and still he continued to curse and be abusive.

– Couldn't you tell him something, Geronda?

– What could I tell him? Here I was telling him nothing and he was constantly cursing Christ and *Panaghia* on purpose, just to annoy me. Once I realized that, I only prayed. And you know, while at first he and others cursed for no good reason, later, when they experienced some difficulty and were about to curse, they would bite their tongue! When someone is cursing, blaspheming, or being impudent, it is better to pretend to be busy and not listening and to say the Jesus Prayer. For, if he sees that you are paying attention to him, he may continue to curse all the more, and you can then become a cause for his demonic influence. If, however, one is not impudent but is conscientious and curses out of a bad habit, you can say something to him. If, again, one is conscientious but has a great deal of egoism, you must be careful not to speak sternly to him but, rather, you have to be as humble as you can and speak to him with pain. What does Saint

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[13] This was the name of the Elder in the world, before becoming a Monk.

Isaac say? *Confute those who dispute with you by the strength of your virtues and not by the persuasiveness of your words. By the meekness and quietness of your lips put the impudence of the obstinate to silence. Reprove the wanton by the nobility of your life, and those who are shameless as regard the senses, by the modest curbing of your eyes.*[14]

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[14] See Saint Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies*, Homily 4, p. 32-33, translated by Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, Massachusetts, 1984.

CHAPTER THREE

"To the Pure All Things Are Pure"[1]

The Spiritual Person Is a "Consuming Fire"[2]

Geronda, how can someone live a proper Christian life in today's society, without being scandalized by those who live far from God?

– Why should anyone be scandalized by others who do not live close to God? If you were in a family with six or eight siblings, and one or two of them were led into error by Satan to live a sinful life, would their sinful life scandalize you?

– No, I would grieve, for they are my brother and sister.

– Well, then, the evil is within us. We have no love, and for this reason we do not consider all people our brothers and sisters and are scandalized by their life. We are all one big family and are brothers and sisters among ourselves, for we are all children of God. If we truly feel that we are brothers with all human beings, we will care for those living in sin and will not be scandalized by their sinful life, but instead will pray for them with pain.

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[1] Tit 1:15.

[2] Dt 4:24; Heb 12:29.

Therefore, if we are scandalized, the evil is within us; not outside. When you feel scandalized, you should ask yourself, "How many do I scandalize? In God's name, shouldn't I tolerate my brother or sister? How does God tolerate me with all the things I do?" Think of God, of *Panaghia*, the Angels, who look upon all the people of earth – as if standing on a balcony and looking down on a plaza – they see some stealing, others fighting, still others sinning carnally, and so on. How does God tolerate them all? How is it that He can tolerate all the evil and all the sin on earth, and we cannot tolerate even one brother or sister? It is awful!

– Geronda, what does Saint Paul mean when he says that *God is a consuming fire*?[3]

– If you throw papers, trash into a furnace, what will become of them? Won't they be burned up and consumed? It is the same with a spiritual person; whatever temptation is thrown at him will be burned up and consumed. *A consuming fire*! When the divine fire lights inside man, everything is burned. No evil thought can stick to him. In other words, the devil will hurl at him all kinds of evil thoughts, but the spiritual man is a *fire* that burns them up. In which case the devil grows weary of doing this and eventually stops. This is why Saint Paul the Apostle also writes, *To the pure all things are pure*.[4] The pure see everything as pure; there is nothing impure. Even when thrown into the mire, the pure will remain pure like the rays of the sun which, no matter where they fall, remain bright and pure.

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[3] Dt 4:24; Heb 12:29.

[4] Tit 1:15.

The spiritual person is transformed for the better by the Saint, and is not irritated by the carnal person. He sees a carnal person and feels pain for him, but suffers no harm. Another person who is in a moderate state of spirituality is transformed for the better by a truly spiritual person; however, he is also transformed by a carnal person, but this time toward evil. A carnal person cannot distinguish a saint and is provoked by another carnal person. And while the possessed sees the saint and flees, the carnal person approaches a saint in order to tempt him and to scandalize him. One who is debased to the condition of the Sodomites is scandalized even by the Angels.[5] The humble person, even when inexperienced spiritually, can distinguish the Angel of God from the devil, because he has spiritual purity and is related to the Angel. Whereas the egoist and carnal man, besides being easily beguiled by the cunning devil, transmits cunningness himself, provoking with his carnality and harming the weaker souls with his spiritual germs.

– Geronda, how does one reach the spiritual state of being able to see everything as pure?

– The heart must be purified so the Grace of God may find a place to rest. *Create in me a clean heart, O God.*[6] Isn't that what is written in the Psalm? When a man or a woman's heart is purified, then Christ comes to dwell in it, and then they no longer scandalize others, nor are they scandalized by others; rather, they transmit Grace and reverence. The person who is careful to maintain his spiritual purity also preserves divine Grace. Then he sees everything in the light of purity, and is also able to utilize the impure for good and spiritual purposes. This good work of spiritual transformation is accomplished in his good and spiritual factory. Useless papers are turned into clean and useful paper napkins, writing pads and so on, old and broken bronze objects are turned into candle sticks and candle stands. In contrast, the person who accepts deviousness and thinks deviously will turn even good things into bad, like the factories which make ammunitions; they will turn even gold into bullets and shells, because that is what their machines are made for.

When someone starts making concessions to sin, he darkens inside, the eyes of the soul are clouded and he can no longer see clearly. Moreover, he is polluted by sin, and sin confuses and entangles him, causing him to see even the pure as sinful. There are people who cannot believe, for example, that some young people live pure and chaste lives. "It's impossible for a such a thing to happen today," they say. These poor souls are so immersed in sin that they see everything as sinful. People who sleep with the demons (*tangalakia*)[7] cannot imagine that others are sleeping with little angels. But we must not expect the swine to be respectful of the lovely lilies. You see, even Christ said, *Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast your pearls before the swine, lest they trample them under their feet.*[8] For this reason, anyone

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[5] Cf. Gen 19:1-5.

[6] Ps 51:10 (Ps 50:12 LXX).

[7] This is how the Elder often referred to the demons.

[8] Mt 7:6.

trying to live a truly pure and spiritual life must be very careful never to be too bold before worldly people or allow that they are spiritually in the right, because they can do much harm and also be harmed themselves. Keep in mind that worldly people have another rule and another *canonarch*,[9] and they cannot tell the difference between the Holy Myron and ordinary perfume.

– Geronda, can someone who wants to live close to Christ be hindered by external temptations?

– No. Only our lack of a spiritual life can separate us from Christ. This is the work of the demon: to create scandals and to spread evil all around; to attack people sometimes head on and at other times deviously.

Christ loves us and is close to us when we live according to His will. For this reason, when you see scandals being created, do not be afraid and do not panic. If someone does not face up to reality in a spiritual manner, he will not enjoy a single day. For the devil will find his mark, that is, his weak point; and will constantly create scandals against him, today one thing, tomorrow another, the day after that yet another.

We Ourselves Should Not Create Scandals

As far as possible, we should be careful not to give cause for ugly situations to develop. Let us not open cracks to the deceiver, because the souls who have faulty thoughts are harmed and are only seeking an opportunity to justify themselves. Then we end up building with one hand and tearing down with the other.

Some time ago, some young, "modern" men came to my *Kalyvi* and we had a discussion. That day I was planning to go out from the Holy Mountain. When they learned of this, they too decided to leave the Mountain and came and sat beside me in the boat. They were asking me with great interest about various spiritual matters. However, some people on the boat misunderstood this and were looking at us suspiciously. If I could have foreseen that others would misunderstand our conversation, I would have taken measures to prevent it.

People are devious. We must be careful not to create scandals. We are not responsible for what we cannot take measures to prevent or for matters in which we have no experience. But we must not expect a reward from God when we create problems through carelessness. We have a reward when we are careful, but the enemy creates problems nonetheless. Someone tells me, for example, that I am in error. First I will see if I am in error or not. I think to myself, "For him to say that, he must have seen or heard something. He cannot just say that without any reason; he must have misunderstood something I said or did" and I try to find out where or how I have been misunderstood in order to correct it. If he says that I am in error, a sorcerer, this is a gain for me as people will not come to me and I will find some peace. But that poor man who says such things will be condemned because he harms the Church. Isn't it a pity? And I am to blame because I was careless about something. Some people come to kiss my hand and in an effort to avoid that, I pat them lightly on the head. One who sees that says, "Look,

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[9] A monastic term referring to the person assigned to preannounce and to prompt the choirs of chanters what they are to chant next. Here the Elder means that it is the devil who prompts and instigates the person living a worldly life to do what he does.

he is blessing them, when he is only a monk! What does he think he is, a priest?" It's not their fault, I should be careful not to do it again.

– Geronda, when someone out of carelessness creates a scandal, some people make the remark, "Leave him alone, he has the excuse of not being responsible for his actions."

– The excuse of irresponsibility applies only to one who cannot think, not to one who is careless. The careless person lights a fire and does not think that where he has lit it it can cause a forest fire. When from time to time such a person lights a fire and singes a few other souls in the process, we have a duty to pray and pour a pail or two of water onto the fire. Also, there are others who are headstrong; they are pious to a fault, and when they hear something they disagree with, they react violently without first examining if it is right or wrong. It is then that we must sometimes discreetly step on the brakes, and again, when they stop, discreetly jam a stone against their tyres to prevent them from rolling backwards and running over other souls.

What Scandalmongers Some People Are!

Do not readily believe everything you hear, for there are some people who relate things as they themselves understand them. Once someone went to *Hadjiephentis*[10] and told him, "Give me your blessing, Father Arsenios,

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[10] That is how the residents of *Pharasa* used to call Saint Arsenios of Cappadocia after his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. *Hadjiephentis* is a compound word from "*Hadji*" meaning "pilgrim" and "*Ephentis*" meaning "person with authority".

because a hundred snakes have gathered up there!" "A hundred snakes? Where could they have possibly come from?" Father Arsenios wondered. "Well, if they were not one hundred, then surely there were fifty." "Wow, fifty snakes!" "There were at least twenty-five for sure!" Again the Saint wondered and asked. "Have you ever heard of twenty-five snakes coming together? Stop it right there, it is not possible!" Then he said there were certainly ten. "Really, they were having a conference and ten snakes got together?" "There had to be five," the man said then. "Five?" "Well, maybe just two." Then Father Arsenios asked him, "Did you see them?' "Well, no, but I heard them in the bushes making a loud hissing sound." So, it could have been some lizard!... I try to never draw any conclusions from whatever I hear until I've had a chance to examine the matter. Some people may say something to criticize, others may simply be relating a story, while yet others may relate it with an ulterior motive.

What scandalmongers some people are! In Konitsa, there were two friends who were very close. On holy days and Sundays they didn't wander around the town but instead came to visit the Monastery in Stomion; they also enjoyed chanting. Afterwards they would take a hike up the mountains, to the Camel.[11] One day a perverse individual sowed discord between these two friends. He went to the one and said, "Do you know what your friend said about you? He said this and this and that." Then he went to the other man and told him, "Do you know what your so-called friend said about you? He said this and that." Soon after that the two men had an awful argument right in the Monastery. In the meantime the instigator left the area and the two men continued to argue terribly. The younger of the two was rather hot-tempered and started calling the older one names. Right then, thinking to myself "Look what temptation can do! What shall I do now?", I went to the older man and said, "Look, he is young and a little hot-tempered; don't get him wrong. Apologize to him." "Father," he tells me, "how can I apologize to him? Don't you see how he's calling me names? I have no idea what he's talking about." Then I went to the younger man and said to him, "Look, he is older, things are not as they seem to you. Go and apologize to him." But he got enraged and starting shouting. "Father, you and I are going to have a fight of our own as well!" "Well then, Panteli, if we must fight, let me go and get ready" I said, and went away. Outside the Monastery I had some long sticks I was planning to use for a garden fence. I walked about four hundred meters and picked up a stick nearly five meters long and started to drag it slowly, hoping to make him laugh. He could see me dragging the stick but could not imagine what I was going to do with it. Then I came into the courtyard holding the stick in my hands and approached the area of the narthex. Then I said. "Come on, Panteli, now I am ready for our fight!" And I poked him with the stick. That was it. Both men burst out laughing. The ice was broken. The devil went away defeated. "What foolishness was this? Are you fellows in your right mind now?" I told them and their friendship was restored.

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[11] The mountain peak on the Pindos range which has the appearance of a camel's hump (Papigo-Tymphi).

– Was the slander spoken on that same day?

– Yes, and they were swearing at each other terribly! See what the devil can do? The other fellow was probably jealous of them for their wonderful friendship, so he slandered the one to the other and then went away. Slander is truly evil, and this is why this type of temptation is called by the name of the tempter, that is, the *diabolos*, the devil.[12] He says one thing to one person and something else to another person in order to deceive and sow discord. And you see how even good friends can believe the lies and be caught in the devil's snare!

– Did that individual spread the lies about the two friends intentionally?

– Yes, to separate them ... out of "love", namely envy...

The Publication of Sins

When we see something unseemly, it is better to cover it rather than make it a matter of public scorn and ridicule. It is wrong to publicize moral transgressions. If some foul smelling waste material is found along a path, a prudent person will make some effort to cover it with a stone to prevent any further disgust. But an impudent individual, instead of covering it, may begin stirring it and spreading its foul smell even more. By the same token, when we indiscreetly publicize the sins of others, we bring about greater harm.

The scriptural verse, *Tell it unto the Church*,[13] does not mean that everything must be made public, because today not everyone is part of the Church. The Church is the faithful who live as Christ desires, not those who oppose the Church. The verse *Tell it unto the Church*, had that particular meaning during the early years of Christianity, when confession of sins was performed publicly before all the members of the Church. In our time, when hardly a family can be found to have the same Spiritual Father, let us not be fooled by the devil with the otherwise-meaningful verse, *Tell it unto the Church*. For when we publicize a moral transgression, we make it known to the enemies of the Church, giving them opportunity to oppose the Church, thus shaking the faith of the weaker members.

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[12] Calumny, slander in Greek is *diabole*.

[13] Mt 18:17.

A mother who has a daughter who is a prostitute does not calumniate and ridicule her in front of others, but rather does everything in her power to restore her daughter's name. The mother will sell whatever she can to raise money, she will take her and go to another city, she will help her to get married, in order to correct her former way of life. This is precisely the Church's way. The Benevolent God tolerates us with love and does not expose anyone, even though He knows the decadent condition of our heart. The Saints, too, never embarrassed a sinner before other people; instead, through love and spiritual sensitivity, they quietly tried to rectify and overcome the evil. We, however, even though we are sinners, do just the opposite, like hypocrites. We must be careful not to be easily shocked and think that whatever others do is evil.

– Geronda, you referred to the publication of moral transgressions. What about other types of sins or sinful conditions? Is it necessary under certain circumstances to make them public?

– Let me explain. I do this to some of the people I know. For example, I see someone doing something bad and scandalizing others. I tell that person one, five, ten, twenty, thirty times to correct himself, but he doesn't. He has no right to continue his disorderly behaviour after being told repeatedly, as others will be misled and imitate him. You see, people readily imitate evil, but not good. So then I have to tell others who see this bad behaviour, in order to protect them.

In other words, when I say, "What so and so is doing does not please me at all," it's not to condemn the person – I have already told him that so many times; it's because others who see his bad behaviour are influenced and might imitate him. They may even say, "Since Father Paisios does not tell him anything, it must be all right." If I do not speak out, that I am not pleased with this bad behaviour, I give the impression that I am blessing it, that it pleases me. But then the whole is destroyed, for people will consider that particular behaviour as acceptable and worthy of imitation. And what can come from that? In the meantime, they think that I have not spoken directly to the person about this matter. They have no idea that I have struggled with this matter for such a long time. And we also have the devil adding his share, "It's all right if you do it. Look, that other person is doing it and Father Paisios has not told him a thing." So when I see that someone continues his bad behaviour, even though I have repeatedly asked him to correct it, I will make it a point of mentioning to anyone who knows him that so and so's behaviour does not please me. And this I do, as I have said, to protect the innocent from evil influence. This is not condemnation. Let's not confuse the two.

Now some will come and say to me, "Why did you tell this to others? It was a secret spoken in confidence." "What secret? What confidence? I spoke to you a thousand times and you did nothing about it. You have no right to harm others who may think that I agree with such behaviour." When harm can come to others, I have an obligation to speak up, and God forbid if I do not! Especially when I am dealing with a young person from a family I happen to know, and I see that his behaviour is destroying the family. I tell him, "Look, if you do not correct your ways, I will speak to your mother. You have no right to come and tell me and then to continue as you please. I will speak to your mother in order to protect your family." Now, if he feels repentance that is all right. But when he continues his disorderly conduct, I must speak up; I have a responsibility to do so.

CHAPTER FOUR

Actions With Prudence and Love

Cultivating Ourselves

If you want to help the Church, it is better to try to correct yourself, rather than be looking to correct others. If you manage to correct yourself, one small part of the Church is immediately corrected. Naturally, if everyone did the same, the body of the Church would be in good health. But, today, people concern themselves with anything but themselves. You see, judging others is easy, whereas working on yourself takes effort.

If we work to correct ourselves and look more intently towards our "inner" activity rather than our external, giving precedence to divine help, we can in turn be of greater and more positive help to others. We will also achieve an inner serenity, that will quietly help the souls of the people we encounter, because spiritual serenity reflects the virtue of the soul and transforms souls. When someone applies himself to external activity before having polished his spiritual inner state, he may struggle spiritually, but he will be fraught with worry, anxiety, lack of confidence in God and frequent loss of serenity. If he does not improve himself, he cannot say that his interest for the common good is pure. When he is liberated from the old self and all things worldly, then he will receive divine Grace and be not only at peace with himself, but also able to bring peace to everyone else. But if he has not received the Grace of God, then he can neither govern himself nor help others in order to bring about a divine effect. He must first be immersed in divine Grace and then utilize his resulting sanctified powers for the salvation of others.

Good Deeds Must Be Done in a Good Way

– Geronda, how do you think when you have to deal with a problem?

– I think of what is humanly possible and what isn't. I examine it from all perspectives. "I will do this; what consequences will it bear on this, on that? What good can it bring or what harm can it cause?" I always try to see a problem from many aspects, so the solution I come up with will be, as far as possible, the correct one. Many mistakes can be made if one is not careful. If one realizes afterwards what should have been done, it is of no benefit, because, as people say, *The bird has flown*! Let us say, for example, someone was being careless and burned a house. Well, perhaps no one will hang the man, but the damage has been done.

People had a problem somewhere. The person in charge came to me and said, "Well, now the problem is solved. I went and found so and so, I told them this and that, and the matter is now settled." I said to him, "The problem has just started! What you had in your hands was not a problem. Now the fire is really burning. At first

there were just two pieces of coal burning that would have burned out by themselves." That person thought that through his actions the problem had been solved and even expected to be praised. Whereas, with what he did, he created a big fuss and magnified the problem.

It takes a lot of attention, prudence and discernment, because good must be done well and be of benefit to others, otherwise it may demonize them. Also, if there's something that you're thinking of doing, allow the thought to mature before doing it; if you act prematurely, in haste, you may later have other problems to torment you. The serious issues, when delayed a little, will later proceed properly and efficiently. Someone may be clever, but he may have vainglory and egoism, negative qualities that run ahead of his actions and lead to carelessness. For example, a hunting dog, even if not purebred, will find the rabbit if it advances carefully. On the other hand, a purebred dog, with all the necessary qualities, if too hasty, will run left and right without any results. Action before thought contains pride. One must not be in a hurry to act; one must first think and pray before acting. When prayer comes first, then it is not the froth of the mind, its frivolity, but the sanctified mind that will guide the process.

Spiritual people sometimes act as if there were no God; we do not allow God to act. God knows how to work. While there are spiritual means to solve difficult circumstances, we try to act by worldly means. When I was at Mount Sinai, every Friday, a Muslim cleric would go up to the minaret of a mosque at the Monastery and cry out the call to prayer. And what a loud voice he had! I could hear him all the way up to the hermitage of Saint

Episteme. Later, the Monastery found a way to prevent this by closing the door on Fridays, when the Muslim cleric would make his visit, but I knew nothing about this. One day on my way out, I saw the Hodja furious, "Now I will show them," he told me, "for closing the door and not letting me in." "They closed it" I told him, "so the camels will not get in, I don't believe they closed it to keep you out." After that I said something to the Fathers about this. One of the secretaries replied, "I'll show that Muslim cleric! I'll set him up. I will tell the government that the Muslim cleric is harassing us." "Look here," I said, "Orthodoxy is not into set ups. Let us keep a vigil, let us chant the service of the Holy Fathers of Sinai, of Saint Catherine, and let us allow God to speak. I will also go up to pray." I also told a few of the Fathers to pray, so that in the end the Muslim cleric received an effective "slap in the face"; he got up, left the area and disappeared. For even if they had locked the door, the government would have seen that the cleric was not in fact harassing them and they would be in trouble with the authorities. The cleric would have said that they closed the door to prevent him from entering the Monastery each Friday, and this would have created a problem for the Monastery.

Another person in the past saw the awesome mountain and wanted to build a country home on the summit of Saint Catherine! He fell ill, died and was gone. Then another person came later to build something at the same place, but he too died and is gone. This is why we should not rely only on our own human efforts; we should pray and allow God to act.

Discreet Behaviour

– Geronda, when we see someone behaving badly, should we try to tell him something?

– It depends on what kind of person he is. It requires great discernment and divine enlightenment in our time. It is not easy to tell you exactly. In a given case, as I have seen, there can be five hundred variables. There are some who can be corrected and others who cannot, and may even react badly to one of our remarks. Especially if someone is an egoist and you offend him, he will react badly. While often realizing he is wrong, he won't give in because of his egoism. And when our motives are not pure, when our concern for others is tainted with pride and our love for them is not pure, then those we try to help will react badly.

When we censure someone with love, with pain, whether he understands our love or not, the transformation can take place in his heart simply because we are motivated out of pure love. But censuring someone without love, with animosity, will infuriate him, because our evilness collides with his pride and causes sparks to fly, just like when the steel strikes the flint. When we endure our brother out of love, he understands it. Even when our evilness is not revealed but is kept inside, he can feel it because it agitates him. This is like the appearance of the devil in the form of an angel, which causes agitation and fear, while the real Angel brings a peaceful, inexpressible exultation.

– In other words, Geronda, if we say something and produce an agitated reaction, are we acting from egoism?

– Many misunderstandings occur, as well; people interpret the same thing differently. One must always examine oneself, "Why do I want to say this? What are my motives? Do I really suffer over this, or do I want to appear good, to project myself?" If we are cleansed and purified, then, whether we become angry or we shout or we censure, our motives will be pure and everything will go well, because we are acting with discernment. For discernment is purification, divine enlightenment, spiritual clarity. Consequently, how can egoism enter into that equation? And when our motives are pure, we are at peace. This is how we can distinguish whether or not our every action is good.

Often you may not realize that the manner in which you say something to someone has a bossy air, "This must be done precisely in this or that manner only!" Egoism enters into the picture and the other person explodes. If the motives are pure and there is humility, the instructive remark will be of help to the other person; otherwise, egoism comes in and has the opposite effect. Remove your self, your egoism, from your actions and then you will be motivated by pure reasons. Indiscreet behaviour will often do more harm than the irresponsible behaviour of the insane, because the indiscreet wound sensitive hearts with their sharp words and will often mortally traumatize them by leading them to desperation.

There are some people who behave in the same manner toward everyone. But we cannot fit into a thimble what we can put into a barrel, nor can we load onto an ox as much as we can on a horse. The ox is good for pulling the plough; it's inappropriate to saddle it and load it. The horse again is not meant for the plough, but to carry weight. One animal is made for one kind of work and the other is fit for another. Let's not try to fit the whole world into our mould. Each one has his own. Let us overlook a few things when they are not harmful. If it were possible to put all the people in this life in order, then there would be no disorderly behaviour and we would have Paradise here, too. So let's not have irrational expectations of others.

The Mark of Spiritual Sincerity Is Love

The world is in a sorry state nowadays because everyone is saying great "truths", which do not correspond with reality. Sweet words and great truths have value when they come from truthful mouths, and they produce results on the well-intentioned and those who have a pure mind.

– Geronda, is there a worldly sincerity and a spiritual sincerity?

– Yes, of course. Worldly sincerity contains indiscretion.

– Does this mean that someone speaks in season, out of season?

– Not only that; truth is truth; but if at some point you speak the truth without discernment, this is not truth. For example, it is true that so and so is mentally disturbed. But if you go and tell this truth you do not benefit anyone. Or, another person says, "In order to be sincere I am going to sin in the public square." This is not sincerity. Anyone who has a great degree of discernment also has noble love, sacrifice and humility, and he speaks even the bitterest truth with great simplicity, sweetened with kindness. The benefits reaped are greater than those of sweet words, as bitter medicines do greater good than sweet syrups.

Truth, when used without discernment, can be criminal. Some people act in the name of truth and commit crimes. When someone has sincerity without discernment he can do double harm, first to himself and then to others, because this sincerity is without compassion. Whoever wants to be truly sincere should start by being sincere with himself, for that's where spiritual sincerity begins. When someone is not sincere with himself, he's at least only fooling and wronging himself. But when he behaves without sincerity toward others, he sins mortally because he fools others.

– Geronda, is it possible for someone to act this way out of simplicity?

– What simplicity? Where did you ever find simplicity in such a person? If he is a child, he'll have simplicity. If he is a Saint, he'll have simplicity. If he is an adult and is not mentally retarded but behaves in this manner, he must be a devil.

– And how does he feel?

– He feels like hell itself. One temptation after another, endless temptations.

– Geronda, is no one then to behave forthrightly?

– Forthrightness as many understand and use it has a legalistic spirit. "I am forthright," they say, "*I proclaim upon the housetops*,"[14] and proceed to ridicule the other person, but they end up ridiculing themselves.

"The Letter of the Law Kills"[15]

Once I asked someone, "What are you, a fighter for Christ or a fighter for temptation? You know that there are fighters for temptation, don't you?" A Christian must not be a fanatic, but have love for everyone. Whoever hurls indiscreet words, even when he may be in the right, does harm. I once met an author who was devout, and yet spoke to worldly people in a brutally frank way that was nonetheless profound, and was thus able to shake them out of their complacency. Once he told me, "In a gathering I said this and that to a lady." But by the manner in which he made his remarks, he had crippled the poor woman. He embarrassed her in front of everybody. "Look," I told him, "you are hurling golden crowns with diamonds at people, but the way you're throwing them you are hurting heads, not just sensitive ones, but hard ones, too." Let us not throw stones at people ... Christian-style. Whoever censures publicly someone who has sinned, or whoever speaks with animosity about someone, such a person is not motivated by the Spirit of God; he is moved by another spirit. The way of the Church is love; it differs from the way of the legalists. The Church sees everything with loving forbearance and seeks to help each person, no matter what he has done, or how sinful he may be.

I notice in some devout people a rather strange type of logic. Their devotion and good intentions are all very well, but they also need to be spiritually discerning and broad-minded, so their devotion is not accompanied by narrow-mindedness or hard-headedness, that is a stubborn and closed mind. The premise is to be in a spiritual state, to have spiritual discernment; otherwise one remains at the level of *the letter of the law*, and *the letter of the law kills*. He who has humility never takes on the air of an instructor; he listens and when asked of his opinion, he speaks humbly. He never says "I", but rather "my thought tells me," or "the Fathers tell us." He speaks like a student. Anyone who thinks that he can correct others thinks far too highly of himself.

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[14] Cf. Lk 12:3.
[15] Cf. 2 Cor 3:6.

– Geronda, when someone sets out with good intentions to do something, only to go to extremes, does he lack discernment?

– Pride has infiltrated his activity but he does not realize it because he does not know himself yet and that's why he goes to extremes. People often start out piously but get lost. This is what happened during the Iconoclast controversy between the iconodules and the iconoclasts. Extremes on one side, extremes on the other. The iconodules went as far as to scrape the paint off the Icon of Christ and put it into the chalice to improve Holy Communion! The iconoclasts would either burn the Icons or throw them away. This is why the Church was forced to place the Icons high up and, once the controversy subsided, the Icons were lowered for the people to venerate them and to render honour to the persons they represented.

Whatever We Do We Must Do For God

– Geronda, usually I am motivated by fear of hurting other people's feelings, or of lowering myself in their eyes. I don't think about disappointing God. How can I increase my fear of God?

– We need to be vigilant. Whatever we do we must do for God. We forget God and then the thought that we are doing something important enters our mind, we become overly concerned with being liked by others, and then we worry about not lowering ourselves in other people's eyes. Instead, if we proceed with the thought that God sees us, that He is observing us, then what we do is sure; otherwise, if we do something in order to appear good to others, then everything is lost, every effort is wasted. For every action of his, man must ask himself, "What I am doing pleases me, but does it also please God?" and must examine whether it is pleasing to God. If we forget to do this, then we also forget God. That's why in the old days they used to say: "For God's sake!" or "O that godless man; he has no fear of God!" Or else people would say: "God willing," or "If God permits it." People felt the presence of God everywhere, they kept God constantly before them and they were careful. They actually lived what the Psalm says, *I have set the Lord always before me; because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.*[16] And they did not waver or move away from God. Now, you see, the European way of life is gradually entering our society and many people are well-behaved out of a worldly sense of good manners. Whatever we do we must do purely for Christ, keeping in mind that Christ sees us and is observing us; Christ must be at the centre of our every action. The human element must not get in the way. If we act out of a need to be liked by others, this does not benefit us at all. We need to be very careful. I have to always examine the motives for my action, and, as soon as I detect that I am motivated by a need to be liked by others, then I must strike it down at once. For when I try to do good but my need to be liked by others gets in the way, this is like drawing water from the well with a sieve for a bucket.

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[16] Ps 16:8 (Ps 15:8 LXX); Cf. Acts 2:25.

Most temptations are often created by ourselves, when we include the self in any cooperation with others. That is, when we are motivated by self-interest and want to elevate ourselves and seek our personal gratification. One rises to Heaven through spiritual descent, not through worldly ascent. Whoever walks lowly always walks securely and never falls. This is why we should uproot, as far as we can, the worldly concern to project ourselves and achieve worldly success, which leads to spiritual failure. We should reject hidden and obvious egoism and the superficial need to be liked by others, so we can come to love Christ most sincerely. Our time is not characterized by what is discreet and noiseless but by what is impressive yet empty. The spiritual life, however, is discreet and noiseless. It is good to do what is well within our means, quietly, without ambitious displays beyond our capabilities, because otherwise it will be at the expense of our soul and body, and often at a high cost to the Church as well.

By truly pleasing our neighbour we also please Christ. It is here that we must be very careful; to purify our agreeableness towards our neighbour, to eliminate the need to please others and to allow this human offering also to go to Christ. When someone is attempting to base ecclesiastical issues upon supposedly Orthodox models, but his aim is simply to position himself more favourably, to seek his own self-interest, how can he ever be blessed by God? As much as possible, he must try to conform to the will of God. He must always examine himself and see how he can perform the will of God. When he performs the will of God, then he is related to God and then, without even asking for it from God, he receives; he receives endless living water from the source.

Let Us Acquire a Spiritual Sense

The Holy Spirit is one but has many gifts. It does not vary from place to place. The Holy Spirit is not a Spirit of confusion, It is one of love, peace... When spiritual men attack one another, this means that they are under the influence of many other spirits, which have no relation to the one Holy Spirit. In the past the Holy Spirit illumined, guided; it was a matter of utmost importance! Today, the conditions for the Holy Spirit to descend do not exist. The Babylonia of the Old Testament was innocent. You'd ask for clay and they would bring straw. Now we have a Babylonia with passions. You ask for clay and they throw a brick at your head. But if someone can eliminate the self from his every activity and curtail his own will, then he can work properly and certainly have the divine enlightenment to create a spirit of understanding. For when we put aside the idea we have of our self the divine ideas come.

One must acquire a spiritual sense in order to have divine enlightenment. This work is crucial in order for people to understand a few things. Especially in our times, this is imposed upon us by the circumstances. You see, even back in Asia Minor during those difficult years, conditions forced people to think more. Two Greeks could communicate between themselves in front of Armenians and Turks without the latter understanding anything. There's even more reason for us today, given the conditions we're living under, to have spiritual people who are able to communicate with each other. Difficult years are ahead. Our mind must be in gear. If our mind isn't in gear and there is no divine enlightenment, then in each case one must receive a directive on how to act. Do not expect to be told everything. Some things you must come to understand on your own without being told.

I remember once in Konitsa, before I went to the army, we heard that guerrillas were coming to town. There were four of us – the three were Muslims – and we hid in a Turkish home at the edge of town. A little Turkish boy, five years old he was, understood the situation and told us, "Go cook room, I go out." So we went into the kitchen and came out behind the house in time to hide in some storehouse further down. The boy went out and told the guerrillas there was no one in the house and they went away. A little boy this high, who barely knew how to speak, was able to think and act so wisely! Now, he was sharp! You see, he observed the situation and he had love, whereas an adult could have done harm by being careless and thoughtless. We who have received Baptism and Chrismation, we who have been instructed in the faith and have studied the faith, must not be stunted in a state of spiritual immaturity. Be sharp witted (xefteria). Do you know what *xefteria* are? They are the Six-winged Cherubim (exapteryga), who have six sets of wings and who flap them as they sing *Holy, Holy, Holy...* Go fly with six sets of wings!

Divine Enlightenment Is Everything

I often tell people, "Arrange matters as God enlightens you." When I say, "As God enlightens you", I mean

that man must view things with divine enlightenment and not through human rationality. One must not think that whatever makes one feel comfortable is also the enlightenment of God.

– How does divine enlightenment come to us?

– If we burnish the wires, the sinful man can become a good conductor, and then the Grace of God will be transmitted to provide the divine light of Grace. Otherwise, the system is short-circuited and Grace cannot enter. The basic thing is for man to take care not to lose the Grace of God, so as to have divine enlightenment. For, everything is in vain if there is no divine enlightenment.

What difficulties Christ had with His earthly disciples, until they were overshadowed by divine Grace! Before Pentecost authority was given to the disciples to help the people. But they did not yet have the divine enlightenment which they received at Pentecost. When Christ told His disciples that He was going to Jerusalem and the Son of Man was going to be crucified and raised, and so forth, they imagined that when He arrived in Jerusalem the people would raise him up to be king. They were thinking in human terms. This is why they were concerned as to who would sit at the right side or at the left side of Christ. The mother of the sons of Zebedee went to Jesus and asked that He place one of her sons at His right and the other at His left![17] But from the day of Pentecost when Christ sent the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, the Apostles received divine Grace forever. Prior to that they had divine enlightenment only on occasion; it was like their batteries were charged but would run down again. They needed to be plugged into an electrical outlet and be recharged. Again and again they would run out, again and again they needed to be recharged. When the Paraclete was sent to the Apostles, they no longer needed to be recharged. It's not that we are now better and they were worse, but rather that we are now living in the time of Grace. And this means that we have no excuses. We are baptized, we have the Holy Spirit through Chrismation, we have it all. Back then Christ had not yet been crucified and, in a way, the devil still had some authority and could easily mislead the people. Following the Crucifixion, Christ granted to all the ability to receive divine enlightenment. Christ sacrificed Himself and liberated us. We are now baptized in His name. The electrical outlet is now permanently in place. Now it is we who are interrupting the passage of divine Grace, and this is because we let the wires get rusty.

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[17] Cf. Mt 20:17-21.

– Geronda, what is required for the Holy Spirit to dwell in man?

– A fighting spirit, humility, *philotimo*, nobility and sacrifice are some of the requirements. Man is worthless without the Grace of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the light, the divine light. The whole basis is there. If someone cannot see he may walk into a window, walk off a cliff or into a ditch. He cannot see where he is going, because he lacks the necessary light. But if he sees a small ray of light, he can protect himself. If he sees even more clearly, he can avoid all the dangers and walk safely on his way. And for Light to come, one must be willing to come out of the darkness. Even if people see poorly, they will not fall and God will not be displeased. If a father is troubled and worried over his children falling into mud, into thorny bushes or off a cliff, imagine how much even more God Himself is troubled over us!

All the evil in the world exists where divine enlightenment is lacking. And when divine enlightenment is lacking, man is in darkness. Then one person says, "Let's go this way," and the other says, "No, I know better, this is the way we must go," and so it goes, *this way, no, that way*. Each person thinks it is better to go his way; in other words, they are all interested in going the right way, but they are all in a sort of confusion and cannot come to a mutual understanding. If there were no confusion, they would not be arguing; they would have recognized the best way and would take that direction.

I mean to say that everyone may have a good disposition, but, given the confusion, many problems are created in society and in the Church. At least in the Church most people do not have a bad disposition, but they do lack divine enlightenment. They struggle for the good, but where do they end up? For this reason we must ask God to grant us even a little divine enlightenment, otherwise we will constantly stumble as if we were blind. In the Divine Liturgy when the priest says, *We offer to You, Your own from Your own...*, I pray to God that He provide light for the people to see. A small ray of light provided by God can dispel the darkness, keep the people from spiritually crippling themselves in the darkness. During the reading of the second Psalm, which Saint Arsenios of Cappadocia read as a prayer to God to enlighten those going to conferences, I pray: "May God enlighten all the leaders of the world; enlighten all the hierarchs and Fathers of the Church to receive the Holy Spirit, so as to be able to help the people of the world." Even if a single one is enlightened and others become at least receptive, can you imagine what great good could be achieved? One timely word spoken by a leader can make a big difference. People have a need for divine enlightenment.

The Benevolent God provides His divine enlightenment to those who have good intentions. A judge once related a case which he had encountered personally. A monk was sent by his monastery with five-hundred gold coins to buy a field. He went to ask a real estate broker, who said to him, "Leave the gold coins with me so you don't have to carry them." So he left the money with the broker. "What a nice man," the monk thought innocently in his heart, "he relieved me of that burden." When the monk returned, the broker not only did not give him back the coins but even claimed that he had given the monk eight million drachmas! The poor monk thought how he would return to the monastery. Not only had he given the five-hundred coins and received nothing in return but the broker was demanding an additional eight million drachmas. The matter ended up in court. At the trial, the judge had the inspiration to ask a series of questions whose answers not only proved that the broker had not given anything to the monk, but that he had also taken the gold coins. I was able to see that the judge was in a spiritual state similar to that of the Prophet Daniel.[18] As he had the fear of God in his heart, God illuminated him to act appropriately and uphold justice.

The whole basis is divine enlightenment. When divine enlightenment comes, then not only are the person and his environment at peace and at ease, but he himself

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[18] See Daniel, Susanna vv. 45-62 (LXX).

can continue to make spiritual progress. This is why I keep saying that while the lights and the chandeliers, these impressive discoveries of the mind, are nice and useful, the divine light of the Grace of God, which enlightens man, is superior. The person who has divine enlightenment can see things very clearly; he is well informed without doubts and can positively help others without becoming weary.

PART TWO

STRUGGLE AND DEVOUTNESS

"One who is heedful and takes the salvation of his soul seriously, struggles, progresses, bears fruit, is nourished spiritually and rejoices angelically."

CHAPTER ONE

"The Good Fight"[1]

The Struggle to Sanctify the Soul

My heart rejoices when I see souls who take heed and struggle in a world that has become full of little devils. Our Benevolent and Righteous God has bestowed upon all of us the proper gifts, for example, manliness upon men and tenderness upon women, so we may struggle and thus climb the spiritual ladder with the help of divine Grace, and come ever closer to Him Who is our Creator. We must never forget that beside us, apart from people who can help us spiritually, we also have Christ Himself, *Panaghia*, the Cherubim and the Seraphim, and all the Saints. Take courage then! Christ is Mighty; He is Almighty and will provide His divine power for us to break the power of the evil one. Ever-present and invisible, He watches over us constantly and will strengthen us whenever we struggle humbly with a good will.

We must as far as possible avoid the causes of sin. We must guard our senses, because it all starts from there.

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[1] 1 Tim 6:12.

And if this is sometimes or even often difficult, let us at least steer away from curiosity; that is, not allow our eyes to take in sinful images, through which the devil tempts us by replaying them as cinema in our mind. If we grasp a small piece of burning coal, it will burn us; but if we roll it around in our palm for a few moments, then it won't. It is the same with sinful images; our eyes cannot hold them when they pass by quickly, for they are simply fleeting images that cannot burn the soul.

Let those who were heedless and who acquired bad habits while living a worldly life accept uncomplainingly the war the enemy will wage against them once they have changed their ways. They must do this, however, without cultivating any evil desires. If they work hard at this, they will be purified and reach the level of pure people, who have never known great sins, learnt bad habits or been sorely tempted. Also, if they learn from their previous failings, they will make great progress. If someone has to walk through a minefield and is not familiar with the terrain, he will need to proceed with caution, otherwise he will be blown up. If, however, he is familiar with the territory, he may indeed suffer some wounds, but with the experience he already has, he will be able to advance steadily and quickly. If one is to work on one's fallow soul, one must first weed out all the thorns, its passions, and then plant virtues in their place. However, this process is an arduous one and requires a strong will and great patience.

– Geronda, could you please tell us in practical terms how this work is done?

– Every day you should try to plant in your soul something spiritual, which will eject something worldly and

sinful. Gradually, the old self will be disclaimed, and you will be able to move freely in the spiritual realm. Replace the sinful images in your mind with holy ones. Replace songs with hymns, worldly magazines with spiritual books. If you do not break away from all that is worldly and sinful, if you do not commune with Christ, with *Panaghia*, with the Saints, with the Church Triumphant, and if you do not place yourself completely in the hands of God, you will not be able to acquire spiritual health.

– Geronda, what is spiritual health?

– Spiritual health equals pure thoughts, an enlightened mind, and a purified heart that unceasingly harbours Christ and *Panaghia*. Watchfulness over ourselves and prayer are a great help in acquiring spiritual health. Prayer is essential for the purification of the soul, and prudence is essential for the preservation of a healthy spiritual condition.

Life, of course, is no summer camp; it has joys but also sorrows. The Resurrection is always preceded by the Crucifixion. The blows of life's trials are essential for the salvation of the soul, for the soul is refined through them. Just as with clothes; the more we rub them in the wash, the cleaner they become. Even with the octopus, the more it is beaten, the more it is cleaned and tenderized. And the fish, too, appears so graceful when alive and swimming in the sea, or even when displayed in the market with the scales and entrails intact. But it becomes useful only once it is cleaned and made to look less appetizing on the outside before it is broiled. It is much the same with people; when a person sheds all things secular – his scales, if you will – it may seem that he is losing life, his worldly liveliness, but in fact, he is merely removing all useless matter in order to be "broiled". Only then is he made useful.

What Helps Spiritual Progress

People who have been buffeted by rough winds, either because God allowed it in order to rein them in, or because of the devil's envy, are in need of much sunshine and spiritual refreshment before they can blossom and bear fruit. They are like trees that have grown bold during winter's halcyon days, only to face the cold north wind afterwards; they will need constant spring sunshine and showers for their sap to circulate again and to blossom and bear fruit.

– Geronda, what must one do to make this spiritual turnaround?

– It takes a *philotimo*-filled effort, with hope and trust in God. Trust in God, simplicity, and struggle with *philotimo* will lead to inner peace and security, and then the soul fills with hope and joy. For the athlete to be crowned with victory takes patience, *philotimo* and spiritual bravery. Bravery stems from a heart filled with *philotimo*; and when one does something with his heart for Christ, he neither tires nor feels pain, because such suffering for Christ is a spiritual feast. Spiritual progress can be rapid with a little *philotimo*-filled effort and awareness of our inner self. In the meantime, the soul will be befriended by Jesus Christ, by *Panaghia*, the Angels and the Saints. Study, prayer, introversion and some peace and tranquillity help a lot too.

Christ helps those who are fighting *the good fight* that all the Saints embraced in order to subdue the flesh to the spirit. Even when wounded, we must never lose our composure, but should instead ask for God's help in continuing with the struggle courageously. The Good Shepherd will hear us and rush to our aid, just as a shepherd responds to the bleating of a lamb that is lost or wounded, or threatened by a wolf. I constantly think of those who lived a wretched life and are now struggling; I love and cherish them more than those who do not suffer from passions. Even a shepherd will be more compassionate with the injured or sickly sheep and will give it more attentive care until it gets back on its feet again.

If, again, we struggle aright but do not see any progress, sometimes the following is happening: Because we have declared war on a demon, he seeks reinforcements from Satan.[2] So, if last year we were struggling against one demon, this year we are struggling against fifty, next year we'll be struggling against even more, and so forth. God does not allow us to see this, so as we don't become proud. But even though we may not realize this, God continues to work in our soul when He sees our good disposition.

– Geronda, what is wrong when someone struggles but really makes no spiritual progress?

– He may be proud of his struggle. But let me tell you what causes some people not to progress: while they have excellent potential, they squander their energy on insignificant things, and this drains them of the strength required for the spiritual struggle. Let us imagine, for example, that we set out to attack the enemy and prepare ourselves with all necessary weapons to confront him. He, however, fearing defeat, attempts to distract us and draws our attention elsewhere through sabotage and diversionary attacks. We then turn our attention to these attacks. We waste our energy right and left. Time passes; munitions and supplies diminish. We provide our soldiers with old, worn-out clothing, and they begin to grumble. The end result is that all our energy is used up, and we do not really confront the enemy. This is what happens to some in their spiritual struggle.

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[2] The most common name in Sacred Scripture and ecclesiastical literature denoting the leader of the fallen and malevolent spirits.

– Geronda, don't one's surroundings help in the spiritual struggle?

– Yes, they do, but sometimes one can live among Saints and still make no progress. Was there ever a better opportunity than that given to Judas, who was always with Christ? Judas had neither humility nor a good disposition. Even after the betrayal, he did not humble himself; throwing the silver coins down with anger and pride, he hanged himself in sin. The Pharisees also acted like the devil. When they had accomplished their evil work, they told Judas, *See to it yourself!*[3] God acts according to the inner condition of man. The Holy Spirit is not obstructed by anything. What I have learned is that no matter where someone may find himself, if he struggles with *philotimo*, he can achieve the desired goal, the salvation of his soul. Even Lot, who lived in Sodom and Gomorrah, had attained an impressive spiritual condition.[4] Now, whether we want it or not, we must struggle for our improvement, so the divine Grace may be active in us. Real events compel us and will continue to compel us to approach God all the more so as to have divine power to confront every situation aright and effectively – and, naturally, the Benevolent God will not neglect us; He will protect us.

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[3] Mt 27:3-5.

[4] Cf. Gen 19:1 f.

In any case, we must know that when we improve our spiritual condition, not only do we feel much better, but Christ, too, is pleased. Can anyone imagine the great joy experienced by Christ when He sees His children advancing? I pray that all men and women may achieve spiritual progress and be united with Christ, Who is *the Alpha and the Omega*.[5] When all of our life is dependent upon Him, then all things are sanctified.

Spiritual Study

– Geronda, what books should be read by those who are beginning their spiritual search?

– First, they should read the New Testament to learn the meaning of Christ, to be shaken up a little; later they can read the Old Testament. Do you know how hard it is when they have read nothing and yet they come to ask for help? It is like an elementary school child going to a university professor and saying, "Help me." What can the professor tell him? "One plus one equals two"? Others, again, are not spiritually restless; they come and say, "Father, I have no problems and I am just fine; I only dropped by to see you." Man can never say that he has no problems, no concerns; he will have something. The struggle for the spiritual life never ends. Or some people come and tell me, "Tell us spiritual things." It is as if they went to the grocery store and said, "Give us some groceries." The grocer is at a loss and needs to know what they need. They need to say, "I want so much sugar, so much rice, and so on, but they only say, 'Give us groceries.'" It is like going to the pharmacy and saying, "Give us medicines," without first saying what their illness is, or whether or not they went to the doctor, and what he advised them to do. Go figure! You see, whoever is seriously concerned over his spiritual condition knows, more or less, what he is lacking, and once he seeks it, he benefits.

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[5] Cf. Rev 1:8, 21:6, 22:13.

As a novice, when I read something I liked, I wrote it down so as not to forget it, and I would try to apply it to my life. I didn't read just to pass my time pleasantly. I had a spiritual restlessness and, when I could not understand something, I would ask for an explanation. I read relatively little, but I checked myself a great deal on what I read. "What point am I at? What must I do?" I would sit myself down and go through such a self-examination. I did not allow what I read to pass me by untaxed.

Today with so much reading people end up like tape recorders, filling up their cassettes with superfluous matters. According to Abba Isaac, however, *Wisdom not based on righteous activity is a deposit of disgrace.*[6] You see, many who are interested in sports read sports magazines and newspapers while they are sitting. They may be like the fatted calf, but they still marvel at the athletes. "Oh he is marvellous! He is great! Bravo!" But they don't work up any sweat, and they don't lose any pounds. They read and read about athletic events, and then they go and lie down; they gain nothing. They are satisfied with the

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[6] See Saint Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies*, Homily 1, p. 8.

pleasure of reading. Some worldly people read newspapers, others romantic literature or an adventure novel, still others watch a football game at the stadium and pass their time. The same thing is done by some people who read spiritual books. They may spend the whole night reading spiritual books with great intensity and be content. They take a spiritual book, sit comfortably, and begin reading. "Oh, I profited from that," they say. It would be better to say, "I enjoyed myself, I spent my time pleasantly." But this is not profit.

We profit when we understand what we read, when we censure ourselves and discipline ourselves by applying it: "What does this mean? Where do I stand in relation to this spiritual truth? What must I do now?" After all, the more we learn, the more responsibility we have to live up to what we have learned. I am not saying that we should not read so that we can plead ignorance and therefore be free of responsibility, for this is a cunning deception; I am saying that we should not read merely to pass our time pleasantly. The bad thing is that if someone reads a lot and has a strong memory, he may remember many things and may even talk a lot about what he has read, and thus deceive himself into thinking that he also personally observes the many things he reads. So he has created an illusion toward himself and others. So don't be comforted by the thought that you read a lot. Instead, turn your attention to applying what you have read. Much reading alone will only educate you encyclopaedically. Isn't that what they call it?

– Yes, Geronda.

– The goal, however, is to be transformed in a God-centred manner. I am not aiming to be a university professor where I would need to know many things. But if I ever need something from this worldly knowledge, I can easily learn it once I have acquired the God-centred knowledge. Do you see what I mean?

– When one has a distraction, is it beneficial to concentrate through study?

– Yes, one should read a little, something very demanding, in order to warm the soul. This keeps distractions and concerns under the lid, and the mind is transposed into a divine realm. Otherwise, the mind is diverted by whatever task is preoccupying it.

– Geronda, when someone is tired or upset, he usually wants to read something light and easy, a short story or a novel, perhaps, or something like that.

– Is there no spiritual book that is appropriate for such times? The purpose is not to forget one's worry, but to be redeemed. Such light reading does not redeem. Novels, newspapers and television have no value in developing a spiritual life. Quite often even some religious periodicals are damaging to Christians, because they stir a foolish zealousness that leads to confusion. Take care. Do not read unnecessary things during your free time. Some reading matter is completely hollow, like a water-pumpkin; it is like looking in a haystack to find a kernel of wheat. Some people say, "Yes, but they relax me." But how can they be relaxing, my good man, if they make you dizzy and cause your eyes to ache? It is better to rest by sleeping. You can learn much about a person's spiritual state from what he reads. One who is very worldly will probably be reading indecent magazines. One who is less worldly will read less indecent magazines and newspapers. One who is

religious will read religious periodicals, or contemporary religious books or patristic texts, and so on.

– Geronda, which spiritual books are the most helpful?

– The various patristic texts, which thank God are available by the thousands today, are very helpful. One can find whatever one needs and desires in these books. They are authentic spiritual nourishment and a sure guide on the spiritual path. However, in order to be of benefit to us, they have to be read with humility and prayer. Patristic texts reveal the inner spiritual condition of the soul, much as axial tomography reveals the inner structures of the body. Each sentence of the patristic texts contains a multitude of meanings, and each person can interpret them according to their own spiritual state of being. It is better to read the ancient text rather than a translation, because the translator interprets the original verse according to his own spirituality. In any case, in order to understand the writings of the Fathers one must constrain oneself, focus and live spiritually, for the spirit of the Fathers is perceived through and by the spirit only. Especially helpful are the *Ascetical Homilies* by Saint Isaac the Syrian, but they must be studied slowly so that they can be assimilated little by little as spiritual food. The *Evergetinos*[7] is truly of great benefit, because it gives us insight into the whole spirit of the Holy Fathers. It is helpful because it describes the struggles of the Fathers against each and every one of the passions, and, by learning how they worked on the spiritual life, the soul is greatly assisted. Also, the *Synaxaria*, the Lives of the Saints, are sacred history and very helpful, especially for young people, but they should not be read as stories.

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[7] A familiar anthology of ascetic and patristic sayings and incidents, which were compiled by the Monk Paul the *Evergetinos*, the founder of the famous Holy Monastery of the Theotokos *Evergetithos* (Benefactress) in Constantinople.

We do not need great knowledge to be devout. If we concentrate and meditate on the few things we know, our heart will be spiritually embroidered. One may be profoundly affected by a single hymn, while another may feel nothing, even though he may know all the hymns by heart, as he has not entered into the spiritual reality. So, read the Fathers, even one or two lines a day. They are very strengthening vitamins for the soul.

"The True Worshippers"[8]

Some people will say, "In this small and peaceful Church I can really experience the Divine Liturgy; in a huge cathedral I cannot. If I am in a simple, white-washed country Chapel, I feel nothing; but if it has frescoes and a beautiful iconostasis, that's where I can truly experience the Divine Liturgy!" Such things are for a person who has no appetite and who needs a little salt, a little pepper to whet his appetite.

– So, Geronda, do you mean that such things play no role and don't help in our worship?

– I am not saying they don't; they do help, but we must not get caught up with such things. Otherwise, people will be looking to experience God only in a contrived manner. They will seek a darkened monastic cell, a vigil oil lamp with very dim light, a beautiful and inspirational

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[8] Jn 4:23.

Church. Without them, they will not be able to pray. But for one who is praying it should make no difference if he is on the train or in the cave or on the road; it should be the same for him. God has made each one of us into a small temple,[9] and we can always have it with us wherever we go.

Everybody is seeking peace of mind, but this comes from within. Those poor people who go from one shrine to another seeking to find Christ do not realize that He is always near them. And while they could find Him without effort, they weary themselves with pointless journeys and still don't find Him. A truly spiritual person does not find peace of mind by wandering around to see various places of interest. This is for those who are suffering, who need to leave their worries behind. A spiritual person who finds divine consolation in his faith does not need this. And if he does not have this divine consolation, then he is no different from a worldly person. His perspective and his interests will still be worldly; they will not be spiritual. He will still be seeking peace of mind in something worldly.

Many come to the Holy Mountain, visit various Fathers, become enthused with what they hear from each, interpret them in their own way, muddle them up in their heads and then say, "We had a really good time." Whereas, if they visited only one Father, heeded his advice and tried to apply all that he said to their life, they would have some positive help. Now what they are doing is spiritual tourism; they are wasting their time, exhausting themselves without gaining anything. How restful and beneficial it would be if they stayed with one Father and applied what he told them! They could experience the soul's inner repose, whereas now they wander from place to place, enjoying the Holy Mountain's beautiful green landscape just like worldly people.

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[9] Cf. 1 Cor 3:16, 6:19.

There are also some others who say, "I will go to this *Panaghia*, or that *Panaghia*!" There is only one *Panaghia*. They make trips to these shrines, not so much out of reverence, but as an opportunity to go on a trip. From that alone you can realize that these people have no peace of mind. If someone does not have some reverence, a sense of humility, you could place him in the Holy Sepulchre itself, and he wouldn't see anything. But if he is truly pious, he could see the Holy Light even on Golgotha.

Once a novice from the Holy Monastery of Saint Savvas was sent on Holy Saturday to receive the Holy Light from the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem for his Monastery – it was customary for the surrounding monasteries to send monks to receive the Holy Light. This particular novice did something cunning; using his monastic cassock, he pushed to the front of the queue ahead of the lay pilgrims. A while later some clerics came to the front, and the novice was asked to stand aside, because it had already been determined who would stand where. Then the novice began to scold himself, "You miserable and disgraceful sinner, how dare you push your worthless self to the front? Get out of here at once! You are not even worthy to stay in the Church!" He truly believed all this he was saying to himself and exited the Church beseeching Christ: "O my Lord Jesus Christ, please let me go to some other shrine at least." And he went further up to the shrine of Golgotha. Once there, he began denouncing himself again: "How could I, a worthless novice, do such a cunning and wretched thing, take the place of those pious pilgrims who are better that me..." And as he was deploring himself, a strong light appeared suddenly like lightning out of Holy Golgotha, and broke him down. Then the poor novice said to himself, "The Holy Light has descended." He went humbly with his little lamp to receive the Holy Light and returned quietly to his Monastery.

– Geronda, do you mean to say that the pilgrimages made, for example, to the Holy Land do not help?

– Look, let me explain. Today, if you set out to receive some benefit, you have to endure a lot of harm in the trains, the aeroplanes, the hotels. Everything has been secularized. What would you profit if you went into a spiritual environment and experienced a massive worldly disarray? One must be very strong to be able to utilize everything for the best. And another thing: the person who greets and guides the visitors at the various shrines would do better some times not to speak at all. They do not speak with reverence, for example, "This is Gethsemane, here is the Holy Sepulchre" and so on. They rattle off very quickly, "Here's this, here's that, now we're going to Bethlehem where the Magi from Persia came from", and before they know it, the tourists are in Kuwait! But this doesn't allow one who has read Holy Scripture, and knows that this is the Holy Sepulchre, there is Gethsemane, to meditate and pray. The tourist guides are needed for those who have not read Holy Scripture; but those who go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land have all read Holy Scripture. So, instead of helping them, they confuse the people all the more. Meanwhile, they go so quickly from one shrine to the other that people have no chance to take in what they hear. It is entirely different when people go on such pilgrimages in spiritual company and with a spiritual guide and the necessary preparation.

A woman from Pharasa, who now lives in Yannitsa, used to say of these modern pilgrims, "Can they be real *Hadjis* (pilgrims)? In half an hour, they go to Jerusalem, and in half an hour they're back! Can they be *Hadji*s?" In the old days, the poor pilgrims would stay at the shrines and attend vigils in order to benefit themselves spiritually, but also to avoid the cost of lodging so they could give the money to charity. And if anyone who went on a pilgrimage and returned to the village without some spiritual edification, people would say, *You were garlic when you went, and you returned an onion.*

Saint Arsenios would go to Jerusalem every ten years, walking five days to Mersina to take the boat. Today it would be rare to find such cases. I remember a Russian who had come to my *Kalyvi* from Vladivostok, a city across from Japan. He had made a vow to go to the Holy Land on foot. When he went to his Bishop to receive a blessing for this pilgrimage, the Bishop said, "You're crazy, you can't possibly go on foot!" He then went to the Monastery of Zagorsk in Moscow and received a blessing from a Starets there. He embarked on his pilgrimage at Pascha and arrived in Jerusalem in October. He walked seventy kilometres each day. Later he also came to the Holy Mountain on foot, and was planning another trip to Jerusalem. He had real divine love. He lived in another world. He knew a little Greek and we could communicate a little. He told me, "I thought the Antichrist would be there, so I could bear witness and become a martyr, but he wasn't! When I go again to Jerusalem, I will make a prostration at the Holy Sepulchre for you as well, and you can pray for me." He got up and did a great prostration to the ground, to show me how he does it, hitting his head on a rock. You could see a fire in his soul. Others, who just go to the Holy Land for tourism and with no reverence, would do better not to go.

How profound is the presence of Christ in the Holy Land! On the road to Golgotha, one can feel a transformation taking place. Even if someone does not know where he is going, merely walking there is enough to be profoundly moved. There is a sign in Latin which says, *Via Dolorosa.*[10] And at the Holy Sepulchre, one can see all types of people. Some are clergy, others lay people; some are dressed decently, others not; some are wearing long clothes, others short, and still others almost none at all; some have short hair and others long. Different people, different styles, different races, from different doctrinal denominations; some are Roman Catholics, others Armenians, but they all go to venerate there! This really made an impression on me! It is a very inspiring and emotional experience. But one must study all these things with good and positive thoughts in order to be inspired and edified spiritually.

– Geronda, if someone has no desire to go to the Holy Land, is it an indication that he lacks reverence and devoutness?

– No. I myself have not gone to all the Monasteries of the Holy Mountain, or even to many of the shrines. I have not visited the Shrine of Saint John the Russian, for example, but this does not mean that I do not revere the Saint. It is good to revere a Saint in some shrine, but we need not run to go there. We should go when an opportunity arises, or when there is some reason. What really matters is what Christ said to the Samaritan woman, *The true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth.*[11]

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[10] "The way of suffering."

The Salvation of Our Soul

– Geronda, some feel certain of their salvation and others have doubts. What is the proper stance?

– The goal is for people to observe God's commandments. The spiritual person must attain such a spiritual condition that even if God does not grant him Paradise, he will not be disturbed. We must realize well that today we are alive, tomorrow we may be gone, and we must be concerned how to be near Christ. Those who have by God's Grace realized the vanity of this life have actually received the greatest gift; it is not necessary to be able to foresee the future, for it is enough to have the foresight to prepare for the salvation of the soul, and to take the best possible spiritual measures to be saved. You see, Christ did say, *The value of one soul is greater than the whole world.*[12] The value of one soul is infinite! This is why the salvation of one soul is an extremely important matter!

– Does this mean, Geronda, that one shouldn't have the hope of salvation and the fear of damnation?

– If someone has the hope of salvation, he will not have the fear of damnation. And for someone to have the hope of salvation, he will have to be somewhat sorted out. The person who is struggling to the best of his abilities, who has no desire to live a disorderly life, but who in the course of the struggle for faith and life falls and rises again and again, God will never abandon. And if he has the slightest will not to grieve God, he will go to Paradise *with his shoes on*. The Benevolent God will surprisingly push him into Paradise. God will ensure He takes him when he is at his best, in repentance. He may have to struggle all his life, but God will not abandon him; He will take him at the best possible time.

God is Kind; He wants all of us to be saved.[13] If only a few were to be saved, why then was Christ crucified? The gate into Paradise is not narrow. There is room for all those who bow humbly, and are not puffed up with pride, as long as they repent, and give the burden of their sins to Christ; then there is plenty of room to pass through the gate. We also have the excuse that we are earthen vessels; we are not purely spirit like the Angels. But we are inexcusable when we do not repent and do not approach our Saviour humbly. The thief on the cross simply said, "Forgive me" and he was saved.[14] Salvation depends on the second, not the minute. Man can be saved with a single humble thought, or with a proud one lose everything.

We should be saved for the sake of *philotimo* itself. There is no greater pain for God than to see man in hell.

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[11] Jn 4:23.

[12] Cf. Mt 16:26.

[13] Cf. 1 Tim 2:4.

[14] Cf. Lk 23:39-43.

I think that gratitude for God's many blessings and a humble demeanour with love toward His images, our fellow human beings, together with a *philotimo*-filled struggle, are enough to keep our soul at peace in this life and the next.[15]

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[15] It should be understood that the Elder here is addressing the Orthodox faithful who are struggling and participating in the sacramental life of the Church.

CHAPTER TWO

How the Devil Works

The Devil Seeks to Disable the Spiritual Warrior

Geronda, sometimes the temptations come one after another and I can't stand it.

– If I give you a solution to avoid them, will you accept it?

– Yes.

– The only way to avoid temptations is to ... make an alliance with the devil! Why are you smiling? You don't like this solution? Look, let me explain. As long as someone is struggling, there will be temptations and difficulties. And the more one tries to avoid temptation, the more contrary the devil becomes. But through temptations – if we use them correctly – we are given the opportunity to make our life, which sometimes is anti-evangelical, "evangelical".

– Geronda, I get bogged down in unimportant things and then I have no energy to struggle for something more spiritual.

– That is like the mines positioned by the enemy to neutralize the army. The devil, when he realizes that he cannot do any other harm to the spiritual warrior, will try to disable him with unimportant things. Also, you should know that there are many other little devils who do great harm. Once one such little devil was asked, "What harm could you possibly do?" And he replied, "What can I do? I go and tangle the strings of the seamstresses, of the cobblers and cause them to become angry." The biggest scandals are caused by unimportant things, not just between people, but sometimes between nations as well. Spiritual people have no serious occasions for scandals, so there the devil finds opportunities from minor things. He can break the spirit of a spiritual person through foolish, childish matters, rendering his heart, as he wants it, useless and incapable of real spiritual struggle.

– Why is it, Geronda, that I start off my struggle methodically and with enthusiasm, but soon neglect it?

– Don't you know? The devil, as soon as he realizes that we are doing spiritual work, turns the switch on to something else. While we set ourselves a certain rule, we find ourselves doing something else, and if we are not paying attention, we do not realize this for days. This is why the fighter must always go contrary to the *tangalaki,* the devil – with discernment, of course –, and be guided by an experienced Spiritual Father.

– Does the devil attack a person who is not involved in refined spiritual work?

– Satan won't go to a useless person; he'll go to a fighter, in order to tempt and disable him. He won't waste time working out cunning temptations on someone who is not involved in refined spiritual work. To one sewing with a sack-needle, he sends a devil with a sack-needle. To one doing very fine needlework, he sends a devil to do very

fine work. To those who are doing coarse spiritual work on themselves, he sends a boorish devil. To the beginners, he sends an inexperienced devil.

Those sensitive people who have a refined soul and a great sense of *philotimo* need to be careful, because the devil gets involved to make them even more sensitive, to the point of melancholy or even – God forbid – suicide. While the devil makes us humans turn against one another and argue, he himself never turns contrary. Those who are careless and neglectful, he makes even more careless and neglectful, putting them at ease with the thought, "You have a headache, you are not well; it doesn't matter if you don't get up for prayer." Those who are pious, he makes even more pious to trick them into the sin of pride or to push them to struggle beyond their strength and become so weary that they abandon all their spiritual weapons, thus causing former fighters to surrender altogether. The devil makes hard-hearted people more hard-hearted; and the sensitive hypersensitive.

And you can see how many people are suffering, some because they are sensitive and others because they have had a nervous breakdown, and are troubled with sleeplessness and need to take many pills, or they are in some other way tormented and wasting away in some hospital. It is quite rare today to find a well-balanced person. People have become like batteries. Most of them seem to have electricity. Especially those who do not go to confession are subject to demonic attacks; they seem to have a demonic magnetism because the devil has authority over them. Few people, no matter whether they are boys or girls or adults, have a calm and serene look.

Possession! Do you know what possession means? Not being able to communicate with other people.

The Devil Gives Us an Injection of Anaesthesia

Once I told some doctors who were discussing the anaesthesia they use in operations, "The anaesthesia of temptation is harmful to man, but the one you use is very helpful." The devil's anaesthesia is like the poison certain snakes use to paralyse small birds and young rabbits so they can swallow them whole, before they have a chance to react. When the devil wants to attack a person, he first sends an assistant little devil, "an anaesthetist", in order to desensitize him, and then the devil himself takes over and starts pounding. But first the "anaesthetist" has to do his work. He gives us an injection of anaesthesia and we forget. Even we monks who have vowed *to be reviled, to be mocked,* are sometimes entangled by temptations and end up doing exactly the opposite of what we have vowed. We start out in one direction and end up somewhere else. We are not careful. Have I not told you of such examples?

In the old days, there was no bank in Konitsa. People had to go to Yannena if they needed to take out a loan. So, some people would start out from the nearby villages to walk seventy-two kilometres just to get a loan to buy, for example, a horse. In those days, having a horse was enough to provide for your family. They would join their horse with a neighbour's and would plough together. A long time ago, a man went to Yannena in order to get a loan for a plough horse so that he wouldn't struggle with the hand hoe. He went to the bank, got his loan and then went to the Jewish[1] shops to look around. The merchants saw him looking around and tried to draw him into their shops. "Come in my good man, I have plenty of good merchandise." The man would enter the shop and the merchant would take down various bolts of fabric from the shelves for him to see. The merchant would unravel the bolt and praise the quality of the cloth. "Take it, it is good quality, for the sake of your children I will sell it to you for less!" The villager continued to look around from shop to shop. "Come in my good man, I will sell it to you for less!" Again, the same routine: The merchant would take the bolts down, unravel them and spread them out before the overwhelmed villager. In the end, the poor man was very confused and gave in. He was a simple yet honourable man. "Well," he thought to himself, "the merchant did take all these bolts down and promised to sell the fabric for less for the sake of my children." So he gave the loan money to buy a bolt of fabric, which wasn't even new. What would he do with so much fabric? Even a rich man wouldn't buy so much; he'd buy only as much as he needed. He returned home with a bolt of rotted fabric. "Where's the horse?" he was asked. "I brought fabric for the children!" he replied. But what can they do with so much fabric? He was now in debt to the bank, he had no horse, and the cloth he bought had rotted from sitting on the shelf for ages. So he was once again forced to hoe the fields by hand to pay off the debt. If he had bought a horse as he had originally planned, he would have ridden home rather than walked, with a few things for the house, and, most importantly, he would not need to work

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[1] As merchants, the Jewish people are famous for being smart and shrewd.

the fields with the hand hoe. Do you see what happened to him when he allowed himself to be distracted at the shops? This is what the devil does; like the cunning merchant, he draws you here and there, and he tricks you into going wherever he wants you to go. You can start off in one direction and end up in another if you are not careful. The devil can outwit you and make you squander your best years.

The Devil Will Do Anything to Prevent Man From Benefiting

The devil is quite the craftsman. For example, if he brings a miserable thought to a spiritual person during the Divine Liturgy, that person will recognize the deception and reject the thought. So the devil will suggest a spiritual thought. "That particular book has a lot of information about the Divine Liturgy." If that won't work, the devil will distract the man by making him look at the chandelier, let's say. And, absent-mindedly, the man will start wondering who might have made the chandelier. Or he might remind him of some sick person that he has to go and visit. "Oh, an inspiration during the Divine Liturgy!" he thinks, when all along it is the devil who intervenes, causing the man to dwell on his thoughts. Then all of a sudden, he hears the priest saying, *With the fear of God, with faith and with love come forth*, and realizes the Divine Liturgy is almost over, and he did not really participate in it at all.

This happens even right here, in the Church; the appointed nun goes to light the candles on the large central chandelier (the *polyeleos*), and I have seen how even

adults are distracted when they turn to see how the nun lights the candles. This is such a childish thing. Only very young children get excited about such things and say, "Look! She lit the candles!" This is understandable for young children, but for adults what can you say? Or, when we are supposed to avoid moving about the Church during the Divine Liturgy, temptation can move a nun during this sacred time to turn the pages of a book on the lectern and start distracting others with the motion and the sound. So, they hear the rustling sound and their mind starts to wander. And yet that is how the mind is distracted from God, and the devil rejoices. For this reason, we should not be the source of distraction to others during the sacred time of worship. We harm people without realizing it. Or you may notice how during a particular reading, when the reader is about to read an important line in the text, one which could benefit the people, a door will bang in the wind or someone will cough, distracting the congregation's attention and depriving them of the spiritual benefit of the sacred text. This is how the devil does his work.

Oh, if you could only see how the devil moves about to do his work! You have not seen him, and this is why you do not understand certain things! He'll do anything to prevent man from benefiting. I have observed this at my *Kalyvi* when I have had conversations with visitors. Just as I reach a crucial point, precisely when I am about to say something important to help my listeners, there will be noise, or someone will arrive and interrupt. The devil will have previously diverted their attention upon the Skete from afar, or have them look at something that will motivate them to arrive at that moment in the conversation, that will force me to change the subject and prevent the others from benefiting.

When the conversation begins, the devil knows where it will lead and, seeing that he will be overcome, he sends someone at the critical moment to interrupt us. "Hello, Father, where's the entrance?" he shouts. And I shout back, "Take some sweet and water and come that way." Others come in at that time and interrupt me, as I have to get up and greet them. After a while still others come and again I have to get up, and then they begin a chit chat of light conversations, "Where are you from?" and so on. Then I'm forced to start all over again in relating the example I had started on. As I proceed, someone else will call out from below, "Hello, Father Paisios, where are you? Is this the way to come to you?" So, once again you need to get up ... and the temptation goes on and on. One day I had six or seven such interruptions, and I was forced to place some "guards"! "You stay guard there and watch for anyone coming from that point; you stay close by here until I have finished my work." Imagine starting a conversation six or seven times only to be interrupted the moment you get to the point of bringing benefit to someone! That's what the devils do!

See what temptation can do? It can turn the switch back and forth from one frequency to another. Just as a fighter is about to receive a message and benefit from it, the dial is switched to another frequency, and the person is distracted by something else. Does he think of something spiritual again? Right away, the dial is switched to other thoughts, and man is never left at peace to focus. If man could only learn the devil's ways, he would be spared a great deal of trouble.

– Geronda, how can one learn?

– By observing. If one observes one can learn. Look at the shepherds; they are the best weathermen, because they observe the clouds and the winds.

The Wing of Will

People can easily be influenced both for good or ill. They are influenced more readily towards evil, because it is the devil who is prompting them. For example, tell someone to quit smoking because it is harmful. As soon as he decides to stop, the devil will run to tempt him: "This type of cigarette has less nicotine, that type has a filter that purifies the smoke. Smoke these; they won't harm you." The devil will find an excuse for him not to quit smoking; he will find a solution! For the devil is capable of finding many excuses. And the cigarette he suggests may be even more harmful. This is why we must be able to exercise our will. For, if someone does not cut out his bad habits when he is young, then it will be very difficult later in life when the will is weakened.

If a person has no willpower, he can do nothing. Saint John Chrysostom says, *All depends upon being willing or unwilling.*[2] This is an important matter. God is by nature Benevolent and always desires our good. But it is essential that we, too, be willing. For man flies spiritually with two wings: God's will and his own. One wing – God's own will – He has attached permanently to one of our shoulders. But in order to fly spiritually we also have to attach our own wing – the human will – to the other shoulder. When someone has a strong will, when he has the human wing, the one which balances the divine wing, then he can fly. But if his will is weak and has not matured, when he tries to fly a little he merely tumbles. He tries again to take off, but he still tumbles.

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[2] Saint John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the First Letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians*, Homily 5, P.G. 62, 428.

– Can the will be cultivated and strengthened?

– Haven't we already said that everything can be cultivated? The will exists in all people, in varying degrees. When a person has the desire to struggle, he prays and asks God to increase his will, and God helps. When a person does not progress in the spiritual life, he should know that this is because he either does not contribute any will, or his will is insufficient or too weak, in which case it's of no help. A bird, for example, has one strong wing, but neglects the other; it loses some feathers and then it cannot fly right. One wing works well, but the other is like a broken comb. The bird flaps it, but the wind passes through it and the bird cannot fly right. It flies a bit and then falls down. It must have both wings intact in order to be able to fly. What I'm trying to say is that man, too, must be careful not to neglect the human will if he wants to fly securely and properly – that is, spiritually. Do you know what the devil does? He slowly creeps up, and little by little plucks some small feather from the human wing, and then another, a larger one, and if man is not careful, the devil can even pluck a large feather and make him unable to fly. And if several feathers are plucked, then, when he tries to fly, air passes through the plucked wing and so he rolls over instead of flying.

The divine wing is always full and complete; there are no missing feathers, because the devil cannot pluck

them out; it is a divine wing. Man must be careful not to be negligent and allow the devil to remove any of the feathers from his own wing. When laziness and indifference creep in, will power is eventually weakened. What can God do if man is not willing? God does not wish to interfere, because He has respect for human freedom. So, an unwilling person renders useless even the wing of God. But when man has the will, that is when he has his own wing intact, and God also is willing, then, with both wings in place, man can fly.

– Geronda, what exactly is this flying you are talking about? Does it mean that I should want to make spiritual progress, to desire my salvation?

– Yes, my child! When I talk about flying I mean our spiritual ascent toward Heaven, not about flying onto some cypress tree!

– Geronda, you had said once that a person can plough, sow and do all the necessary work, but may not even harvest enough to cover the cost of the seed.

– Yes, that's right. If he is not careful, the devil can rob him of all his efforts. One who is heedful and takes the salvation of his soul seriously, struggles, progresses, bears fruit, is nourished spiritually and rejoices angelically.

CHAPTER THREE

The Benefits of Good Fellowship

Brotherhood

Geronda, I am troubled when you say we will go through difficult years.

– You must love one another, be at peace with one another, train yourselves spiritually, be brave, remain united as one body and fear nothing. God will help. Cultivate love, the spiritual kind. Love one another like a mother loves her child. You should have a sense of brotherhood and a spirit of sacrifice. Soon we will go through difficult days.

Naturally, we monks and nuns leave this world and abandon relatives and friends in order to enter the large family of Adam – God's family. But for the laity, who live in society, it is important that they maintain relationships with relatives and friends who live a spiritual life so that they will be helped. The Christian who is struggling in the world is helped when he has relationships with spiritual people. No matter how spiritually one lives, one needs – especially in our present time – good fellowship with others. Contact with spiritual people is most beneficial – even more so than spiritual study – because the joy of

this spiritual relationship provides a great impetus to one who struggles spiritually. Even at work, in a government department, for example, it is good to get to know other spiritual people for mutual assistance. A problem, say, could arise among colleagues and mutual support would be helpful, but they may hesitate to speak to one another, unless they have already established a fellowship.

– Geronda, when someone refuses to help us in some need, is it right for us to hesitate to ask him again for something we may need?

– No, you should not hesitate to ask again. Perhaps he did not have the ability to help at that time. It is like you asking me for a small cross and I give it to you. You ask me again at another time, but I do not have any to give you. Later on, I go and buy little crosses so that I can give them out to people, and you come along and do not ask me for one, while I am looking for an opportunity to give them out.

Today people can be living in the same apartment building and not know each other. In the past there was the neighbourhood that allowed people to get acquainted and help each other in a time of need. Someone might be travelling with his horse and cart and meet an acquaintance on the road. "Where are you coming from? Where are you going?" They might ask each other. "I'm going there too. Come on, we'll go together." Or maybe if someone else had planned to go somewhere on his horse, he would tell his neighbour, "Where do you need to go? If you can wait, I'll be going there in three hours by horse and I can take you with me." Or, he might say to a neighbour, "Tomorrow I will be going that way, why don't you stay overnight with us and we can leave together early in the morning." People thought of each other and whenever they could offer some help they did. They were curious, in a good way, and would ask if they could be of help in any situation whatsoever. They even had acquaintances from village to village.

– Geronda, how does it help people to have ties of spiritual friendship?

– Nowadays, even if spiritual people do not want to be bonded together, they will be forced to do so by the devil. Through his abundant evil, the devil actually brings about a great good for the people today. For example, suppose that a believing father wants to have a tutor for his children. He will be obliged to find a good and believing teacher to provide this service in his household. A teacher, who is a believer but has not yet been assigned to a school, wants to tutor children and will want to find a good family to feel secure. A tradesman, who lives spiritually, be he a painter or electrician, or builder, will look to find work in a good family, to feel at ease and to avoid the troubles he would otherwise encounter in a worldly setting. By the same token, a Christian family man will seek to bring into his house a good tradesman who is also a believer. Thus, each will be looking to find another spiritual person with whom he can cooperate. Gradually, spiritual people will come to know one another through the various trades and professions.

In the end, the devil with his evil work actually does some good, without wanting to, by separating the sheep from the goats. The sheep and the goats will be separated *and there shall become one flock, one shepherd.*[1] You see, in the past the villages had a shepherd, and each of the villagers would give him their sheep or goats, one five, another ten, and he would pasture the sheep and the goats together, because back then the goats were tame and did not butt the sheep with their horns. Now the goats have gone wild and are savagely butting Christ's sheep. The sheep, in turn, are seeking a good shepherd and a flock made up of sheep only. For the world has now become fit only for those who live in sin. For this reason people will separate themselves – the sheep will be separated from the goats. Those who want to live a spiritual life will eventually find that they are not able to do it in this world; they will be searching to find people like themselves, people of God. They'll want to have a Spiritual Father to guide them and they will distance themselves all the more from sin. And this good is now being achieved by the devil and his evil ways, without him wanting to. So, now we see in the cities and the villages, too, some people running to nightclubs and entertainment centres while others are going to Church for vigils, for supplication prayers, for spiritual gatherings, and these people are united among themselves.

In difficult times, a strong fellowship is formed among people. During the war, we lived as soldiers for two years in the platoon and were closer than brothers, because we shared the difficulties and the dangers. We were so close-knit that we called each other "brother". They were people of the world, with worldly mentalities, and yet they did not want to be separated from each other. They had not read the Gospel, nor any spiritual books. They only had a simple worldly education, in the good sense; but they also had the most important thing of all: love, a sense of brotherhood, a spirit of fellowship with one another. Recently, one of our comrades from the army died, and all the others gathered at his funeral from all over the country. A fellow army man also came to see me here. How tightly he embraced me! I could not break loose from his warm brotherly embrace.

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[1] Jn 10:16.

Now we are fighting the devil. So, try to become more brotherly and to have a brotherly fellowship. That's how we will all be able to walk together on the steep path of ascent toward sweet Golgotha.

Spiritual Kinship

– Geronda, yesterday you told us that you felt all the people you saw recently to be your brothers; how are we to understand spiritual kinship?

– We are brothers and sisters in the flesh with all people. We are all brothers and sisters, and servants of God, and the faithful are also by Grace children of God, redeemed by the divine Blood of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. In the spiritual life, we are related in the flesh to Adam and in the spirit to Christ. Those who live spiritually experience this spiritual kinship. They think the same way and have the same aims and goals. But if you had, for example, a sister in the flesh who followed her own routine and lived a worldly life, you would not feel a spiritual kinship with her.

– Is spiritual kinship ever dissolved?

– When someone ceases to live spiritually, he ceases to have a relationship with the other who continues to live spiritually. This separation is self-imposed; he is not distanced by the other. The more someone lives according to God, the more closely he can approach Him; and the more he distances himself from a godly life, the more he is isolated from Him. God does not send him away; it is he who distances himself from God's presence. And just as divine Grace is a power that acts from afar and is transmitted to people, the devil's evil power is also activated from afar and transmitted. For example, two souls who are in a spiritual state and think of each other, share a spiritual contact that transfers divine energy to one another. By the same token, two souls who are living in sin and happen to have some communication, exchange demonic influence even from afar, like a telegraph being sent back and forth to one another.

– Geronda, when there is such a demonic communication between two people and one changes for the better, is the other person helped?

– Yes, he gets no response, because the other doesn't pick up the receiver. The line is cut, and there is no longer any communication between them. This may make him think and decide that he, too, ought to change his way of life.

– If we have regular contact with someone who has passions, but are not swayed by them, can we influence that person's character?

– If we happen to have a spiritual condition, a little sanctity, we can be of much help, because the divine Grace of God influences our fellow human being. When we tolerate our brother through love, he senses it. And by the same token, when there is hatred in us, even when it is not expressed, again he senses it. A soul transmits that which it possesses. Passion transmits passion, anger transmits anger, rage transmits rage. Whereas, when the soul is filled with virtues, virtue will transmit virtue.

– In other words, if someone keeps company with virtuous people he'll be helped?

– Of course he'll be helped. If you enter a monastic cell where incense is burned on a regular basis, you will come out smelling of incense. If you enter a stable, you will pick up the smell of the stable. If you visit a worldly home, you will smell of secular perfumes when you leave.

During the German Occupation, we had a little over an acre of various melons that we cultivated. We had the American type from the Agricultural School that were white and this big and very sweet; we also had the native melons from Argos, and so on. If pumpkins happened to be planted close to the sweet American melons, the sweetness left the melon and went into the pumpkin. The pumpkin was sweetened and the melon became tasteless. This is what happens with the cross pollination which the bees carry out by going from one flower to another. If you see a melon with a large navel mark, you should know that the melon was grown close to a pumpkin. If a native melon from Argos is close to a good sweet melon, it will receive sweetness from the good sweet melon. The sweet melon will lose its sweetness, but at least that sweetness will go to another melon. But if a pumpkin is close to a good melon, the sweetness will go to the pumpkin and, if you go and cook it, then it will need a lot of salt. The melon loses, but at the same time the pumpkin doesn't gain. Whereas if it is a melon, the good melon may lose but at least the other melon will gain; it will become sweeter.

What I want to say is that if a Christian who is not very advanced goes near one who is spiritually advanced, the more advanced person may grow weary and lose something, but the less advanced person will benefit. But if a non-believer goes near a spiritual person, the spiritual person's time and effort will be wasted. At most, the secular person might be slightly moved by some of the things the spiritual person may say to him, and consider them from a secular, philosophical point of view. That is, he will understand them in a secular way and will not be able to benefit from them spiritually. In other words, what we'll have is a slightly sweeter pumpkin.

Be Careful What Company You Keep

In our Communications centre in the army we had an organizational chart to identify the distinctive signals of all our stations, to be able to tell which were our own and which were the enemy's. For a while, we were under training at the Communications centre, serving as intermediaries and identifying the signals. We would say to the other, "What is this?" or, "One," just to see what they would say, and this way we could work out who they were. That is, when we were not certain which station it was, we had no confidence, and with tic-tac tricks, we would try to make the identification. The same thing happens in spiritual life; when we see that a particular "station" is a foreign one, we must say, "Well, am I going to cooperate with him?" Of course not! It is a serious matter to recognize a foreign station and decide to cooperate with it, and far worse to recognize it as not only a foreign but also an enemy station, and thus to collaborate with the enemy! I wish to emphasize that in our relations with others we must exercise discernment and care. The safest way is to consult one's Spiritual Father.

Even in conversations, we must be careful, because sometimes they begin as spiritual conversations and end up as gossip. And it is not only that we are wasting our time; we are also wasting our souls when condemning someone else, for we have no right to judge other people or other situations. If we can, following a painful conversation, we should try to help in an unpleasant situation. We should not even speak ill of the dead, because every soul is fortunately in God's hands.

I have noticed how frequently many people's thoughts are damaged by a careless word. If we were to be taxed for every word we uttered, do you know how careful we would be? If the rule were, "If you say so many words, you will pay so much tax," we would end up counting our words! Even on the telephone, we try to think out what we will say, how long we will be able to talk, because we have to pay. Much time is now lost in idle talk.

– It is written in the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* that detraction is the offspring of hatred.[2] Can love ever exist in simple gossip?

– Yes, if we love a person envied by others, we can say something against that person to discourage the envy. We must see all the perspectives. But a damaged or disturbed soul who thinks that he is being wronged and feels embittered and indignant may, given an excuse, lash out with such indignation, and do such harm to other souls that

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[2] See Saint John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 10:1-2, translated by Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, Massachusetts, 1991, p. 89.

even the devil himself could not do. Judas was indignant over the waste of the precious myrrh, which the myrrh-bearing woman poured out on Jesus, and commented that it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. The other Apostles who had Grace[3] were influenced by Judas. They had considered what he said to be externally correct, and were influenced, for they did not know his greedy heart. And you see, Christ had even given to Judas the responsibility of holding the moneybag, in order to satiate his passion as *he used to take what was put into it.*[4]

– Geronda, what should someone do when two people disagree and they ask for his opinion?

– If you find yourself with people who have personal differences, it is better to express your opinion in front of both of them. Otherwise each may take a word of yours out of context, as it suits him, and then use it as heavy artillery – should his words carry weight – striking mercilessly at his opponent, and thus risk being struck himself, for no good reason, by the flying missiles. One should avoid such persons as much as possible, in order to be tranquil and able to pray for their peace and for the peace of the world in general. When it is impossible to entirely avoid such scandalous people, we should at least try to avoid much interaction with them and limit the scandals. It doesn't matter that some people have no evil in them but only a simple superficiality, because they, too, through their superficiality, can cause scandals.

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[3] Cf. Mt 26:6 f.; Mk 14:3 f.; Jn 12:3 f.

[4] Jn 12:6.

Maternal Love

– Geronda, are those who love discreetly spiritually pure?

– There are many cases. It may often be a matter of simple worldly politeness. Some people are kind and polite, but this doesn't mean they are also spiritually noble, with a sense of sacrifice. To have certain good traits is another matter. One who has worldly politeness and is hypocritical can do a lot of harm, because the other person is fooled into opening his heart and wasting his devoutness on a secular person who has no idea what devoutness is. This is like giving gold coins to someone who is only familiar with bronze drachmas. Moreover, one must not waste time trying to spiritually admonish people who are only at ease with worldly conversations and who only wish to selfishly express their opinions.

– Geronda, what should we do when someone comes and tells us his problem over and over again, when in fact it has been more or less taken care of?

– When the problem is stated for the first time, it is right to allow someone to speak for as long as he wants, and say as much as he needs to say. Then you have to listen to him. If you don't, he will think you are tired of him and don't understand him. Later, however, if he continues to repeat the same things, you will tell him, "It is not that I can't listen to you, but to do so won't do you any good. You turn even the summer into winter. Now you are better; it is spring. Soon it will be summer. But you think of winter in the summer and you catch a cold." Sometimes, however, one can observe the following, even among spiritual people.

Someone goes to tell his sorrow to someone else who does not want to listen and be deprived of his joyfulness. He may pretend to be in a hurry to go somewhere, or he may change the subject in order not to be upset. This is utterly satanic. It is as if someone is dying next to me, and I move further away so that I can keep on singing. Where then is the scriptural verse, *Weep with those who weep*?[5] Especially when it concerns serious ecclesiastical issues and, as a Christian, one does not share the anguish of another, then that person does not participate in the Body of the Church.

– When I don't excuse others for some action of theirs, does this mean that I have a hard heart?

– You don't excuse others but you excuse yourself? Then, tomorrow Christ will not excuse you. Your heart can become hard as a rock in an instant if you are not careful, and it can equally quickly become tender. You must acquire a maternal heart. You see, a mother will forgive all things, and sometimes will pretend not to see certain mischief. Be patient with others and excuse them; tolerate others so that Christ will tolerate you.

– Geronda, how does the heart expand and grow?

– When you always excuse the mischief, the imperfections and the shortcomings of others, and you see yourself mirrored in them. Of course, the evil one may sometimes bring second thoughts about others, especially if there is some reason. But it is up to us to accept these thoughts or repel them. When we put ourselves in someone else's shoes, we will sympathise and want to excuse them. Also, if something is not done out of malice but out of superficiality, the action informs us and does not provoke a reaction. It is only natural for human weaknesses to exist among all human beings. But it is wrong to have an evil disposition.

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[5] Rom 12:15.

– If someone is feeling badly and I am well, can I influence him?

– What if it is temptation making it seem that way? How do you know that you are in a better state than the other person? From the moment I believe that I am better than the next person and I feel sorry for him, I should feel sorry for myself and not the other. Even when we see that the other person is really not well spiritually, we should still make excuses for him. Only for himself should someone not make excuses; he should judge himself worse than others and grieve for his own shortcomings. Such a person will recognize that he has not done anything for all that God has given him and will confess, "My God, do not take me into account, put me off to the side; I have done nothing to merit Your help, but do help the other person." Those who actually do progress spiritually do not recognize their great progress; they only experience great compunction and humility and the love of God together with an inexpressible exultation of joy.

CHAPTER FOUR

Devoutness Moves God

What Is Devoutness

Geronda, what is devoutness?

– Devoutness is the fear of God, modesty, spiritual sensitivity. A devout person may strain to make great efforts, but this straining drips honey into his heart. It does not turn his life into a martyrdom; it is an enjoyable experience. The actions of a devout person are refined and careful. He strongly feels the presence of God, the Angels, the Saints. He senses his guardian Angel nearby, watching over him. He always keeps in mind that his body is a Temple of the Holy Spirit,[1] and lives a simple, pure and sanctified life. His behaviour is always well thought-out, marked by modesty and awareness of all that is sacred. For instance, he is careful not to turn his back on the holy Icons. He does not place the Sacred Scripture or any spiritual book where he sits, and so on. If he looks upon an Icon, his heart flutters and his eyes flow with tears. Even when he merely sees the name of Christ written down somewhere, he will bow reverently and kiss it, his soul overflowing with sweetness. Even for a small piece of newspaper thrown to the ground and bearing the name of Christ or simply "Church of the Holy Trinity", a devout person will bend down, pick it up and kiss it with reverence, feeling sadness to see it thrown away like that.

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[1] Cf. 1 Cor 3:16, 6:19.

– Geronda, is piety[2] one thing and devoutness another?

– Piety is a perfume, while devoutness is incense. For me the greatest virtue is devoutness, because the devout person attracts the Grace of God, becomes a receiver of Grace, and the Grace of God remains naturally with him. Consequently, divine Grace reveals the devout, and everyone respects and loves him, whereas the impudent are avoided by young and old.

You women should be more devout than men. It especially behoves a woman to be devout, because of her nature. When men are not devout, they are simply indifferent. But women, when they lose their devoutness, do extreme things. Someone told me: "When I went on a pilgrimage with my wife to the Holy Land, I also went to the River Jordan to be baptised, and my wife sat on the banks of the River washing her feet! 'What are you doing?' I told her. 'You came to the River Jordan to wash your feet?' I was so upset I swore at her!" It seems that she was completely indifferent to the sacredness of the place, while the poor fellow had so much devoutness.

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[2] With the term piety the Elder refers to the observation of external forms of devotion, which have no inner correspondence.

Devoutness Is Transmitted

– Geronda, how can I acquire devoutness?

– The Fathers say that to acquire devoutness one must associate with devout people and observe how they behave. When Saint Paisios the Great was asked, "How can I acquire the fear of God?" he answered, "You must associate with people who love God and have the fear of God in their heart, so that you, too, may acquire such divine fear."[3] This, of course, does not mean that you should do outwardly whatever you see others doing without feeling it within you, for this would not be true devoutness, it would be false. Anything false is abhorrent. Devoutness is the Grace of God in man. Whatever the devout person does, he does because he feels it in his heart. Of course, there is natural devoutness within us, but, if we don't cultivate it, the devil will use our forgetfulness to make us insensitive and not devout. But the behaviour of the devout awakens devoutness in us again.

– Geronda, why do the Fathers speak only of devoutness when they advise us to acquire it by associating with those who are devout? Why do they not say the same about other virtues also?

– Because devoutness is a transmittable virtue. The movements and behaviour of a devout person are transmitted like perfume, provided the recipient possesses good will and humility. And let me tell you, if one is not devout, one has nothing. A devout person can clearly recognize all things sacred as they truly are, even though he may not be educated. For example, he will not err in anything that has to do with divine meanings. It is much like small children who do not have any negative thoughts about their father and mother, because they love and respect them, and are able to see clearly and properly what their parents are doing. How much more so in this case, where we have to do with God, Who is incomparable and perfect in all things! One who is not devout falls into errors and falsehoods regarding the doctrine of the faith. I can see what errors are made when those who are not devout write interpretations and commentaries on the sacred texts of Holy Scripture.

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[3] See *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Abba Poemen, 65, p. 147.

All spiritual things require devoutness and heart. When everything begins with devoutness, everything is sanctified. Specifically, in order to write a Service for a Saint, one must love the Saint, and have reverence and devoutness for that Saint, so that everything one writes will be heartfelt and exude authentic devoutness. When one reaches a state of divine *eros*, divine madness, the verses flow naturally from within.

– What else can help us acquire devoutness?

– Study with the mind everything that is sacred and truly digest these readings, but also make use of any opportunities afforded; this will gradually awaken devoutness in us. For instance, if I have the chance to pass by a Church to pray and I don't take it, I am deprived of Grace. But if I want to go and something prevents me then I am not deprived of Grace, because God sees my good intention. Much help in acquiring devoutness is also found in becoming familiar with the Saints of our region, our country, so that we can love them and feel a link with them. God rejoices when we love the Saints and show devotion to them. And if we show devotion to the Saints, our devotion to God will of course be greater!

– Geronda, what can help us to move about in Church with devout reverence?

– When you set out to go to the Church, you should say to yourself, "Where am I going? I am now entering the House of God. What do I do? I revere the holy Icons and I worship God Himself." From your monastic cell or from your assigned obedience, you go to the Church. From the Church you go to Heaven and beyond Heaven to God Himself.

– How is this done?

– The Church is the "House" of God. And our own true home is in Paradise. Here the nuns are chanting. There the Angels, the Saints... If we politely knock at the door, wipe our feet, and sit reservedly upon entering a worldly home, how are we then to behave when we enter the House of God where Christ is being sacrificed? With one drop of divine Blood He once redeemed us from sin, and now continues to heal us with kilos of His Blood and to nurture us with His all-holy Body. Therefore, when we recall all these awe-inspiring divine events, it helps us to move about in the Church devoutly. But I see in the Divine Liturgy, even when the priest says, *Let us lift up our hearts*, and we respond, *We have lifted them up to the Lord*, few are those who truly raise their mind to the Lord Jesus Christ! Perhaps it is better for us to pray with our mind, "May our hearts be raised to the Lord," because both our mind and our heart have a tendency to be drawn downward. Otherwise, we are lying when we say, "We have raised them to the Lord," when in fact our mind is not there at all. Of course, if our heart is indeed turned toward Heaven, then everything will surely go toward Heaven.

– How does it help to chant with contrition?

– Keep your mind focused on the divine meanings of the hymns and approach them devoutly; don't grasp the divine meanings as literature, but with your heart. Devoutness is one thing, and art – the art of chanting – another. Art without devoutness is ... paint. When the chanter chants devoutly, the chanting overflows from his heart, and he chants with contrition. When one is in a wholesome spiritual state, everything will be all right. This is why one must be well-ordered inside and be able to chant with his heart, with devoutness, in order to actually chant with contrition. If someone has negative, inappropriate thoughts, what kind of chanting can he possibly offer? He cannot possibly chant with the heart. Why does the Sacred Scripture say, *Is any among you cheerful? Let him chant praise.*[4] When Saint John Koukouzelis once chanted, while pasturing the goats, the goats got up and stood upright. This is how people realized that he was indeed Koukouzelis, the chanter of the imperial court. Whatever you do, do it with your heart, and do it for Christ. Put devoutness even into your embroidery, for it will be used with the sacred vessels, and even those you make for the *katzion*.[5] When someone is devout, his spiritual beauty is apparent in everything he does; it shows in his reading and in his chanting, even in his mistakes.

– In his mistakes?

– Yes, you can see that even the mistakes a devout person happens to make will profess devoutness, a certain kind of modesty.

Outward Piety

One who has great faith and true devoutness is nurtured by something higher, spiritual, which cannot be readily described. But there are those who have an arid outward piety, who say dryly, "Now that I am entering the Church, I must sit carefully, I mustn't move, I must bow my head, and this is how I must cross myself." Others may question their faith, yet stand throughout an all-night vigil.

– Geronda, do they do this because they are restless and searching for something?

– There must be something going on inside. This is all very well, but one must feel something inside; it must not be merely an outward show. It is one thing to take off your hat as you enter the Church out of devoutness, and quite another to remove it to cool your head. Devoutness can be seen by the way we receive the gift of Holy Communion, by the way we receive the *antidoron*,[6] and so on.

– Geronda, can one be annoyed by someone else's expression of devoutness?

– Look, if someone makes the sign of a large cross, but does it simply, humbly, it doesn't annoy. But if it's done

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[4] Jas 5:13.

[5] A large censer used to cense the Church, at certain points in the liturgical services, by the appointed person who wears an embroidered covering draped over his right shoulder. Above the handle of the censer is the cup where the charcoal and the incense are placed, and around the edge of the censer little bells are hanging to make a rhythmic sound during the censing.

[6] The blessed bread given to non-communicants at the end of the Liturgy.

to show off, over and over again, then people will begin to make fun of him. Or if, when passing by a Church, he looks to see if there are other people watching him, or patiently waits for them to gather and then begins to make the sign of the cross and prostrations to be seen, then indeed people are right to make fun of him. You see, a worldly spirit is frowned upon. True devoutness shows. Without true devoutness, what is normally becoming and decent[7] becomes unbecoming and indecent.

"Give Not That Which Is Holy Unto the Dogs"[8]

When people bring you a sick person's clothing to place on the holy Relics to be sanctified, be careful to take only an undershirt and not other underclothing; it is inappropriate and impious. The sun, of course, cannot be polluted, nor is God polluted; but we can become possessed by the evil one through our lack of devoutness.

In the past, when people got sick, they would take a little oil from the vigil oil-lamp, rub it on their bodies and they would get well. Now the vigil lamp is kept only as a formality, just to provide some light, and the oil, when they clean the vessel, is poured into the sink. Once I went to a home, and saw the lady of the house washing the vigil lamp, and I asked her, "Were does the water from the sink go?" "Into the sewage system," she answered. And I had to ask her, "How is it that you take oil from the vigil lamp to bless your child when it is sick, and now you pour the remains of oil into the sewage system in order to

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[7] Rom 13:13; 1 Cor 14:40; 1 Thess 4:12.

[8] Mt 7:6.

clean the lamp? How can you justify this? How can you expect God's blessing to come to your home?" In today's home there is no place to put a sacred object, even the little piece of paper in which you may have wrapped the *antidoron*.

I remember in our home even the water used to wash the dishes did not go into the sewage system; it was disposed of elsewhere, because even the leftover crumbs were considered sacred, since we prayed before and after the meal to bless everything. All of these customs have disappeared today, and for this reason divine Grace is also missing and people are susceptible to demonic influence.

As much as we can, we must be careful in all things. After Holy Communion or the *antidoron* or Holy Unction, it is good to wipe our hands with some cotton wet with alcohol and to burn the cotton. When we sweep the Sanctuary, what is gathered should be burned in a clean place or thrown into the sea, because some pieces of *antidoron* or even of Holy Communion may have fallen there. Naturally, if the Body and Blood of Holy Communion is dropped on the floor, Christ does not remain there to be stepped upon, but Grace leaves us. Abroad, the Churches don't have separate cisterns for the waters of the *Proskomide*, which go into the drains with the rainwater. "We are forbidden to have separate cisterns for such purposes, because they become a breeding ground for bacteria," they say. While virtually everyone is now filled with bacteria of body and soul, people will still say that bacteria will be formed if a drop of sacred oil is put upon our heads. How then can the blessing of God come upon us? This is where the world's demonism starts from. Fortunately, there are a few devout women, young and old, and the world is saved.

– Geronda, a lady asked us to paint an Icon of Saint Arsenios to place in her living room.

– Will she have only Icons there? Won't she have other paintings, pictures and so on? Won't they also smoke there? It would be better to put it in another room with the other Icons and go there to pray. I went to a home once where the Icons had been placed below the stairs, even though they had plenty of better places to put them. In another home, the Icons had been placed in front of the waste pipe. And I asked the lady of the house, "How did you ever think of putting the Icons in this spot?" "This is where I am at ease with them," she answered. And it was not even the east side of the house, but the north. How then can the Grace of God come to us? Sacred Scripture says, *For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance. But whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he hath.*[9] We imagine that we have something, and whatever little we might have is taken away from us.

Little by little, devoutness is lost altogether, and this is why the evil things we see are occurring. If one is not careful, one can even become possessed by the devil. There was a woman – God grant her forgiveness for she is now gone – who had been possessed, because she poured the holy water down the drain. She had a small amount of holy water in a bottle and she thought, "It must be stale by now; I'll pour it out, and use the bottle for some other need." She poured out the holy water and washed out the bottle, because a tiny piece of sweet basil had remained in the bottle. After that she became possessed. Grace had abandoned her, for Grace cannot remain with a person who is devoid of any devoutness.

– Geronda, what if someone pours out some holy water by mistake?

– If the same person had put the holy water in a cabinet, and had forgotten about it and poured it out by mistake, then he bears partial responsibility for the sin. But if another person had placed the holy water in the cabinet, and the one who poured it out did not know that it was holy water, then he bears no responsibility.

If a person has no reverence and does not respect all sacred matters, how can divine Grace approach him? Grace will go to those who honour it. "Do not give what is holy to the dogs," says the Sacred Scripture. If there is no spiritual sensitivity, there cannot be any progress.

On the Holy Mountain, someone took pews out of a Chapel and put them in his. Another person took the tiles from the roof of another Chapel and used them for his veranda. When it rained, the water came into the sanctuary and fell on the Holy Altar. I went in once and what did I see? The Chapel had been consecrated, and at the centre of the Holy Altar there was a holy relic, a vertebra. I picked it up and washed it at the holy water cistern. Later, I went and talked to them: "What are you doing? The Chapel is consecrated, and you've removed the roof tiles letting the water fall upon the Holy Altar!" They later went with a roofer and somewhat repaired it.

In another place, boards were removed from the Sanctuary to make a boat dock. A storm came and washed away the boards and the cement. And people do not understand that all these things are so irreverent.

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[9] Mt 13:12.

I remember in Konitsa there was a grandfather who would chase away the children who scratched the walls of the Church; he considered this to be irreverent. And now look at what is happening around us!

Devoutness in All Things

Here, too, we must be careful. A cloth adorned with crosses was spread out on a sofa; it is inappropriate to sit or to step on crosses. Some Jewish merchants mark the bottom of shoes with crosses. Many times crosses are found not only on the outside of shoes, but also on the inside of the heel and the sole. How strange it is to pay money for the shoes and to be stepping on crosses! Long ago, these people had made some baby rattles with *Panaghia* and Christ on one side and Karagiozis[10] on the other side. People will say, "Karagiozis on one side, Christ on the other, what does it matter!" And the poor people would see Christ and *Panaghia* and buy them for their little children. The children dropped the rattle, it was stepped upon, and soiled. And now, people told me that Roman Catholic missionaries somewhere near China are wearing some necklaces which have Christ on the inside and Buddha on the outside. Either place Christ alone on the inside, or confess Christ openly, otherwise the Grace of God does not come. Here in Greece some people in authority, without thinking, have placed *Panaghia* on a stamp, which is usually thrown away and stepped upon.

– Geronda, can someone be devout in some things and not in others?

– No, if he is truly devout, he will be devout in all things. Once a priest was staying at the Monastery of Stavronikita, and once, during the reading of the Six Psalms,[11] he lowered the pew seat and sat! "Father, they're reading the Six Psalms," I told him. "This way I can enjoy it all the more," he told me. Just think! Years later he came and found me. He told me that he was preparing Icons and giving them away as a blessing. I asked him, "How do you glue the Icons?" He explained, "I put glue on the wood, position the paper Icon on the wood, and, when I have a stack of them, I pile them up and sit on them so they can stick well. Then I take a book and read for a while!" When I heard this, my hair stood on end! I said, "What are you doing? You are sitting on the Icons so they can stick?" "Why not?" he said, "Isn't it proper?"

Do you see where this is going? The bad thing is that this lack of devoutness gets worse; it never stops. Man evolves either for better or for worse. See where that priest started from and where he ended up. "This way I can enjoy the Six Psalms all the more," he said then, and afterward he reached the point of saying, "By sitting on them, the Icons will stick, and I can do some reading." Then he thought it strange what I told him about the Six

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[10] Karagiozis is the main character of Greek shadow-theater – a popular form of entertainment derived from folk tradition. Destitute, barefoot, ugly and hunchbacked, he mocked the poor folks' traits, such as cleverness, cunningness, servility and laziness.

[11] The selection of Six Psalms (3, 37, 62, 87, 102, 142) from the Book of Psalms, which are read at the beginning of the Orthros as an introduction to this Service. After the end of the first three Psalms which make up the first part, when we say "Glory to the Father..." and three "Hallelujah", we do no small prostrations nor our cross, as the rule requires in other circumstances.

Psalms. And there were other, older Fathers who were standing at the time. They leaned a little on the pew and did not move at all. It is one thing if someone is very tired or sick, and his legs are weak and he is sitting for that reason – Christ will of course not condemn him. But it is very different to imagine this to be the right way and to even add the remark, "I enjoy the Psalms more when I am sitting." How can you justify this? Spiritual life is not a matter of enjoyment. If you're hurting, sit; Christ is not a tyrant. Abba Isaac says, *If you cannot stand, sit.*[12] He does not say, "If you can, sit!"

– Geronda, why don't we sit during the reading of the Six Psalms?

– Because they symbolize the Judgment. During the reading of the Six Psalms, our mind should be thinking of the hour of Judgment. The reading takes about six or seven minutes. During the first part, we do not even make the sign of the cross, because now Christ will come not to be crucified, but will come as Judge.

People Were So Devout in the Past

– Geronda, why is devoutness so hard to find nowadays?

– Because people have stopped living spiritually. They interpret everything using worldly reasoning and banish divine Grace. In the past people were so devout! In Aitoloakarnania,[13] there were some grandmothers who had such simplicity and devoutness that they would bow to the mules of the Holy Monastery of Proussos, whenever they came down from Proussos to provide for the needs of the Monastery. "These are the mules of *Panaghia*!" they would say and bow down with reverence. Now, if they showed such devoutness to the mules of the Monastery of *Panaghia*, imagine what devoutness they showed to *Panaghia* Herself!

– Geronda, was the devoutness of the Pharasiotes instilled in them by Saint Arsenios?

– They had devoutness and the Saint cultivated it further. This is the tradition. Prodromos Kortsinoglou, the elderly chanter for Saint Arsenios, was very devout. He was over eighty years old, and he still walked half an hour to go to the lower part of Konitsa to chant in the Church. "I am a dog of Christ," he would say. During the cold winter, the frozen roads were very dangerous. The waters from the springs would flow downhill and freeze and you had to find a spot to walk and not slip. He defied all obstacles to attend Church and chant. Now that's devoutness!

My parents told me that the Pharasiotes in their ancestral town in Asia Minor had collected money to build a Church in Pharasa. However, later Saint Arsenios wanted to distribute the money to the poor families since they already had a Church. The Saint went to distribute the money to the poor families in the region and they would not take it. They would not take money away from the Church. Then the Saint decided to send the money to the bishop in Caesarea by the town president.[14] The Saint told him, "Take some companion with you for the road." "Your blessing is sufficient," the president replied and went on his way alone. When he arrived, the bishop asked him, "But what did *Hadjiephenti*s want you to do with the money?" "To distribute it to the poor families in the area," the president replied. "And why didn't you do as he asked?" "The people would not accept the money because it belongs to the Church," he said. Finally, the bishop insisted that the money go back to Pharasa. When the Pharasiotes were leaving their town with the exchange of the populations, they asked Saint Arsenios to take the money with them in order to build a Church here in Greece. Then Saint Arsenios told them with tears in his eyes, "In Greece you will find many Churches, but not the faith which exists here."

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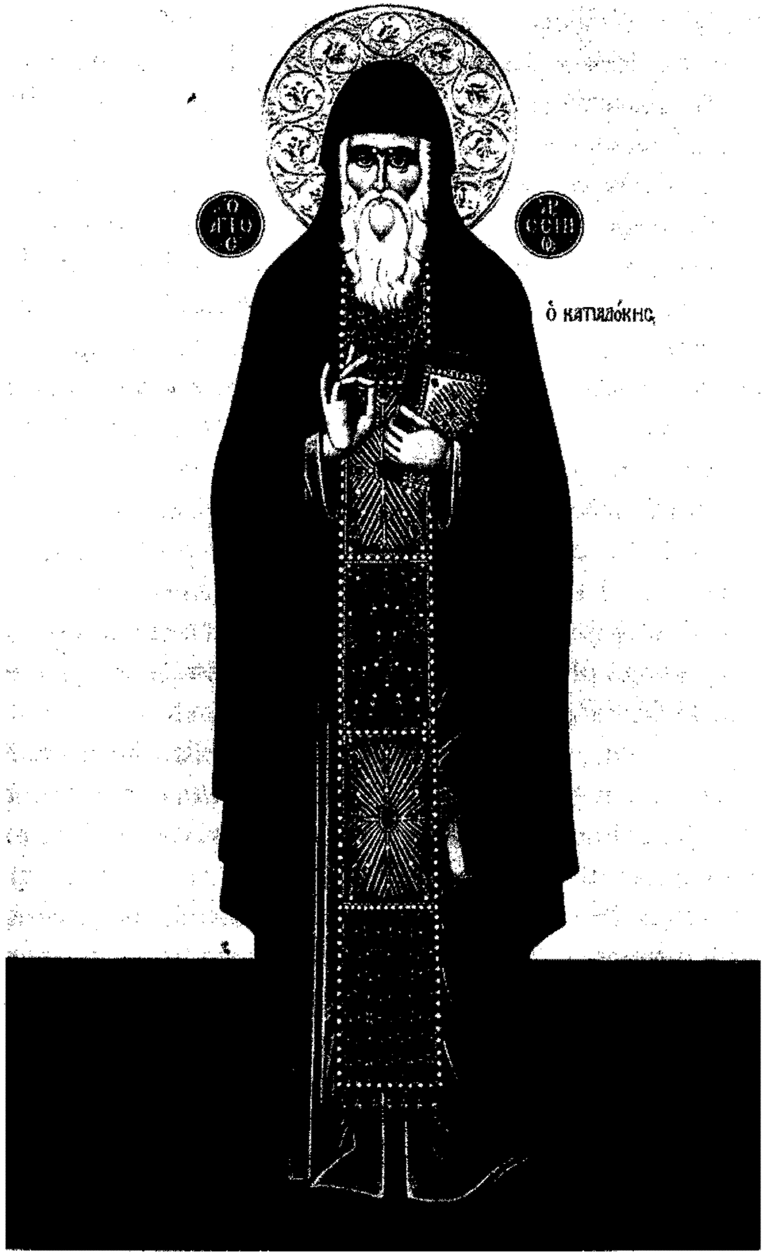
[12] See Saint Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies*, Homily 20, p. 103; Homily 51, p. 247; Homily 75, p. 366.

[13] A prefecture in central Greece.

[14] President of the town of Pharasa was the father of the Elder Paisios.

Reverence For Icons

What reverence we must have for the holy Icons! A monk once prepared an Icon of Saint Nicholas to give to someone as a blessing. He wrapped it in a clean piece of paper and placed it in a cabinet until the time came to give it. But without realizing it, he placed it upside down. After a while, a rattling sound could be heard in the room. The monk looked around to see where the sound was coming from. He did not realize at first that it was coming from the cabinet. The rattle continued for some time, "tap, tap, tap" and would not leave him in peace. Finally, when he approached the cabinet and realized the sound was coming from there, he opened it and heard the sound coming from the Icon. "Let me see what is the matter with this Icon," he said to himself and unwrapped it. He saw what



had happened, stood the Icon upright and immediately the sound stopped.

The devout person will especially venerate the holy Icons. And when we say, "He will venerate the holy Icons" we mean he venerates the person depicted on the Icon. When someone has a picture of his father, his mother, his grandfather or grandmother, his brother, he cannot possibly tear it or step on it. How much more must we venerate the Icons of the Saints. Jehovah's Witnesses have no icons. The honour we show to the Icons they consider to be idolatry. I asked one of them once, "Don't you have photographs in your homes?" "Yes, we do," he said. "Well then, does a mother kiss the photograph of her child, when that child is far away?" "Yes, she does," he said. "Does she kiss the paper of the photograph or her child?" I asked and he replied, "She kisses her child." "Well then, just as she kisses her child when she kisses his photograph, we kiss Christ when we kiss His Icon; we don't kiss the paper or the wood."

– Geronda, even if a plank of wood had been once painted with an icon of Christ, of *Panaghia*, or of a Saint and the colours have faded over time, are we not still to show reverence for it?

– Yes, of course. When someone venerates the holy Icons with devoutness and fervent love, he absorbs the colours from them and the Saints are imprinted on his soul. The Saints are pleased when they are lifted up from the paper or the wood and imprinted in people's hearts. When a Christian devoutly kisses the holy Icons and prays for help from Christ, *Panaghia*, the Saints, he draws into his heart not only the Grace of Christ, of *Panaghia* and of the Saints, but also the whole of Christ, or of *Panaghia*, or of

a Saint, and places them upon the iconostasis of his own temple. *Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.*[15] You see, every divine service begins and ends with the veneration of the holy Icons. If people could understand this they would feel such joy, they would receive so much power!

– Geronda, in the Supplication Service of the *Panaghia*, why does a verse in the hymns of praise say, *Speechless be the lips of the impious who do not venerate your sacred Icon*?

– When someone is not devout and yet kisses the Icons, are his lips not speechless? And, when the devout kisses the Icons, aren't his lips full of praise? There are some people who do not even touch the Icon when they venerate it. Others touch only their lips to the Icon when they kiss it. Here, like this.[16] Did you hear anything?

– No.

– Well then, "speechless" are the lips. Whereas the devout person kisses the Icon and you can hear the sound of the kiss. In that case, the lips are "eloquent" with praise. It is not a matter of cursing when the verse says "speechless", but rather that those lips are without a sound, while the others are eloquent with sounds. When we look upon the holy Icons, our hearts should be overflowing with love for God and for the Saints, and we should prostrate ourselves to venerate them and kiss them devoutly.

If you could only see a devout elderly Monk, Father Savvas in the Monastery of Philotheou, with what devoutness, with what heart, he would venerate the holy Icon of *Panaghia*, the Sweetly-kissing! In this Icon of

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[15] 1 Cor 6:19, 3:16.

[16] The Elder reverenced an Icon, kissing it without a sound.

Panaghia, which the Fathers always kissed at the same spot, a little bump had formed over the years.

The Icon which is painted with devoutness draws the Grace of God from the devout iconographer, and then transmits eternal consolation to the faithful. The iconographer is depicted, translated into the Icon he makes; and for this reason the iconographer's spiritual state is very important. Father Tychon[17] used to tell me, "My son, when I paint the *Epitaphios* Icon I chant the hymn: *The noble Joseph, after taking down Your sacred body from the Cross, wrapped it in a clean shroud and laid it in a new tomb*. He used to chant as he shed tears and his tears fell upon the Icon. Such an Icon preaches an eternal message to the faithful of the world. The holy Icons preach eternally down through the centuries. One who is suffering will look upon an Icon of Christ or of *Panaghia* and directly receive consolation.

The foundation is devoutness. You see, someone may lean against the wall where an Icon has stood and he receives Grace, while another may own the best Icon, but because he is not devout, receives no benefit. Or one may benefit from a simple wooden cross, while another, who is not devout, may not even benefit from the True Precious Cross itself.

We Offer the Purest to God

Once I was scandalized here in your Church. I saw a candle burning on the Holy Altar that was this short!

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[17] See Elder Paisios of the Holy Mountain, *Athonite Fathers and Athonite Matters*, Souroti, Thessaloniki 1993, p.15-40.

Even on my candle stand before the iconostasis, I do not leave such a small candle to burn; I feel it would show contempt.

– Geronda, people say that the candle should be allowed to burn to the end.

– Yes, it should burn to the end, but where? This is important. It is one thing for the candle to burn to the end on the candle stands where the congregation light their candles, and another thing for it to burn to the end on the Holy Altar or the Holy Prothesis. It is inappropriate to leave half a candle burning on the Holy Altar. Also on the great chandelier, the candles should be changed if they become very small, even though they may last through the entire Service. During the Divine Liturgy, use a large candle for the Small and the Great Entrance, for it symbolizes Saint John the Forerunner. In some places, they put the vigil oil lamps out to economize! Don't they understand that God will send them great blessings when they show devoutness for Him? Also, it is inappropriate to use for memorial services the very thin candles that look like candle-fillers. It is a disgrace to give these tiny things to others.

– Geronda, may the nuns burn in their cells as many candles as they want?

– Let them burn the candles, and may the devil burn, too. After all, the whole world is burning. Only be sure the candle you are burning has meaning; and always accompany it with prayer.

It is a great thing to put your trust in God. We eat the sweet fruit and offer God the resin of trees with the censer. We eat the honey and offer God the beeswax, and even to that, we add paraffin. One candle we offer to God as a token of gratitude for His abundant blessings, and even that is not pure because we mix it with paraffin. Imagine if God expected us to offer to Him the honey! I can only imagine what we would do then! Either a watery broth or a little sugary water is all that we would offer. May God not take us too seriously! We can be thrifty in all things except in the worship of God. To God we must offer the purest and the best we have.

– Geronda, people do not easily understand that burning paraffin candles is a sign that our devoutness is flawed.

– Tell the people, "It is not good for your health to burn paraffin candles in Church." They may think a little about this. And if the Church is small, people will have trouble breathing. It is better to light one small beeswax candle than a huge taper made of paraffin. This is why many get dizzy and faint in Churches. It is unhealthy to burn all that paraffin in such a small Church! And this is not all. People want to use in the vigil lamps oils that are not fit for consumption. What are we coming to! It says in the Old Testament that the oil used in the Temple had to be made from olives gathered from the trees and not from those that had fallen to the ground. Not that God has any need of that oil or of the incense. No, but God is moved, because it is an offering which expresses man's gratitude and love for Him.

At Mount Sinai, I was impressed by the Bedouins, who had nothing to offer. But still, they gather some very small stones that are different from the others, or if they find a few leaves in the cracks of the mountain, they gather them and go up and leave them on the rock which Moses struck with his rod and water gushed out.

Or the mothers who are nursing their babies go there to drip a few drops of their milk with the thought, "May God grant me milk to nurse my children." You can see the gratitude they have. It is not a small matter. And look at us. Those Bedouins will judge us. They leave on the rock little pieces of wood, a few leaves, some bright little stones... Has God any need of these? No, but God helps because He sees the good heart, the virtuous disposition. This is how their good intentions are expressed.

– Geronda, when we light a candle, do we say that it is for a particular purpose?

– You light the candle; where are you sending it? Aren't you sending it somewhere? With the candle, we're asking God for something. When you light the candle and say, "This is for those who are suffering bodily and spiritually, and for those who have the greatest need," both the living and the dead are included. Do you know how much consolation the dead receive when you light a candle for them? This way we can have spiritual communication with both the living and the dead. In other words, the candle serves as an antenna, bringing us into communication with God, with the sick and with those who have fallen asleep in the Lord, and so on.

– Geronda, why do we burn incense?

– We burn it to praise God. We glorify Him and we are grateful to Him for His abundant benefactions to us and to the entire world. Incense, like the candle, is also an offering. And having offered it to God and to the Saints by censing the holy Icons, we then also cense the living icons of God, the faithful men and women who have gathered in Church.

You must put your heart into it, whether it is an expression of gratitude or a request. With each candle I say, "My God, with all my heart I ask You to do me a favour." And with the incense I say, "I thank You God with all my heart for all Your gifts. I thank You for forgiving my many sins and the ingratitude of all the people and my own abundant ingratitude."

Cultivate your devoutness and your modesty as much as you can. This will help you receive the Grace of God. For, if someone is devout and spiritually modest and humble too, he can expect to receive divine Grace. If he has no devoutness and no humility, the Grace of God does not come to him. What does the Sacred Scripture say? *But to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at My word.*[18]

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[18] Isa 66:2.

CHAPTER FIVE

Self-Offering Provides Divine Oxygen

People Tend to Forget Those Who Suffer

Geronda, you have said that the more we deprive ourselves of human consolation, the more we receive divine consolation. Is this why prayer is felt more when one is hungry?

– Yes, but a hungry person can also understand the hungry. A satiated person cannot understand the suffering of the hungry. I heard that somewhere people throw away food, and down the street there are people – some Greek-origin Russian refugees from Pontus[1] – who have no food to eat. These poor people live in hot-houses and corrugated iron shacks. Let's say that those who throw away the food do not know of the needy people nearby. Can't they at least ask and find out? They throw the food away! We refuse to give away even things that we no longer need. It is a sin when people hold on to things they no longer need and refuse to give them away to those who really need them and are unable to buy them. That, for me, is the greatest hell. At the Hour of Judgment Christ will tell us, *For I was hungry and you gave me no food.*[2]

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[1] A region of NE Asia Minor.

Some people who have everything say, "There are no poor people today." They don't think of others. They don't put themselves in other people's shoes so as not to be disturbed and lose their peace of mind. Then how can they possibly find the poor and the hungry? But if you think of others, you will seek out the poor and find out what they need. There are so many orphans who have no one to show them some human warmth. People tend to forget those who suffer. Their mind is on the wealthy who have everything, and they compare themselves with them instead of those who are suffering. If only they could think, for example, of some Northern Epirotes, who've been imprisoned for twenty years in a tiny cell simply for making the sign of the cross, then perhaps they would see things differently. It is a terrible thing! We cannot even imagine it. Do you know what it means to be in a one-by-one meter cell? The prisoner cannot sit up, lie down, or even stand up. As for a window, there may be a hole in the wall.[3]

– Geronda, that is more like a grave than a prison!

– At least in the grave one is spread out flat. And the tortures that go on in those prisons... There is so much suffering today; the world is making weapons and has abandoned those who suffer. In Africa I saw people eat camel droppings. The people there have bodies that don't look like bodies. They look like frogs. Their chest is like a little basket of bamboo strips. Why am I troubled? We have everything and can't feel the pain of others. And yet we still want to go to Paradise...

When I went to the Holy Monastery of Stomion in 1958, there was in Konitsa a Protestant who was supported financially from America and who had proselytized eighty families. He had also constructed a building where the families gathered. Those poor people had great needs and because of their great poverty they were forced to become Protestants, for they were then helped financially. One day one of them said to me, "Because of my great need, I would even become a Jew." When I heard this, I said to myself, "Something must be done." I gathered a few people who were somewhat better-off and could help and I talked to them. At the time these people were entirely worldly but at least were well disposed. One soul in particular, although entirely worldly then, was great-hearted. When I saw her, I said to myself, "On the outside she looks like a rotten branch, but inside she is good kindling." We decided to collect some money and give it to the poor families. Whatever money was gathered, I told them to go and give it themselves to the poor so that they themselves might be helped spiritually.

This way, even if their heart was hard as stone, it would soften and become a human heart and the gate of Paradise would open for them, too. Soon, all of them changed heart, because they could see the suffering that existed around them and did not have the heart to go out and have fun. They would tell me, "You have disarmed us, how can we go now to entertain ourselves?" They also came close to the Church. Later, I learned that one of them became a chanter. But the eighty families, too, by the Grace of God, returned to the Orthodox Church one after the other. Later, when the American Protestants came to see the work of the Protestant who had proselytized the families, they took him to court because he no longer had any followers!

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[2] Mt 25:42.

[3] It was spoken in May 1990.

– Geronda, some people will readily ask for help when they are in need, while others say nothing.

– Many are ashamed and do not want to be exposed. These people are in greater need, and any help given to them matters more. I know of two doctors who for some reason became so poor that they did not have money to buy even some aspirin. For someone who has love in him, it's not enough to simply give to anyone who happens to ask for charity; he seeks to find people who have some need in order to support them. My mother always looked to find such cases.

The Criterion of Love

When someone has the wherewithal to give charity, you can't be sure whether he has love or not, for he may not be giving out of love, but just to get rid of certain things. When someone does not have much and yet does offer charity, then his love is evident. Let us suppose that I believe I have love; God, in order to test my love, sends me a poor person. For example, if I have two watches, a good one and a slightly damaged one, and I give the inferior watch to the poor man, this indicates that my love is of secondary quality. If I have real love, I will give the poor man my good watch. However, faulty thinking overtakes us and we say, "Why should I give my good watch to someone who has none? For him even the old broken watch will be good enough." But when you give the old watch, then the old self still lives in you; but if you give the new watch, then you are a renewed, a reborn man, according to the Gospel. It is a damnable state when you keep both watches and give neither away.

– Geronda, how can someone get out of that state?

– He should think, "If it were Christ Himself, what would I give? Certainly the better watch." This is how we can see which love is the real one. He will then make a decisive choice and the next time give the better object. At first it may be a little difficult, but, if he keeps on trying like this, he will eventually get to the point of giving both the old and the new in order to help others. He may then not have a watch, but he will have Christ in his heart and will hear the sweet beat of his heart rejoicing with divine joy.

If they take away your coat and you also give away your shirt,[4] then you will be clothed by Christ. If you feel sorry for some unfortunate soul and help him, think, if he were Christ Himself, what sacrifice you would make! This is how we can be put to the test. The person of faith sees Christ in the person next to him. Christ Himself has said, *Whatever you did to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me.*[5] The honour, of course, is given to each person accordingly,[6] but the love is the same for all. In his heart, both the highest-ranking official and the poor man hold the same place; the general and the soldier.

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[4] Cf. Lk 6:29.

[5] Cf. Mt 25:40.

[6] Cf. Rom 13:7.

– Geronda, why is it that sometimes the person receiving help behaves badly toward his benefactor?

– The devil goads the person to behave badly so that we may become indignant and lose the benefit of our kindness. It is not his fault; the devil goads him to make us lose everything. When you do a kindness, always feel that you have simply done your duty and be prepared to face temptation so that you may not lose, but gain all of the good that you may have done. Someone, for example, offers charity and has no intention of revealing it. Then temptation comes in to it, and makes others say to him, "You avaricious person, you have done nothing and so on, while so and so has done this and that..." This may force him to say humbly, "Well, I, too, have done something small, a hospital." Or he may become indignant and be forced to say, "Who, me? I, who have done this and that?" Either way, he loses the spiritual benefit. Or the devil may provoke the recipient of charity to tell his benefactor, "You are ungrateful, an exploiter" and so forth, until he finally impatiently responds, "I'm the exploiter? I, who offered you this and that charity, and am your benefactor?" Not stopping there, he'll go on, "What an ungrateful person he is; I didn't even care if he said a *thank you*, but he should have at least acknowledged my kindness." But when one expects an acknowledgment, well then, there goes the spiritual benefit and everything is lost. Whereas if the benefactor holds on to good thoughts and says, "It's better that he's forgotten the kindness I did him." Or, "Perhaps he was upset or tired to speak like that," he excuses the bad behaviour and does not lose the spiritual benefit.

When we do not expect repayment of any kind for our kindness, then our spiritual reward remains pure. Christ did everything for us and we crucified Him. What is it that we say in our hymns, *Instead of the manna I offered them, they gave me gall to drink.*[7] Let us always try to do good without expecting anything in return.

He Who Gives Receives Divine Joy

Two joys exist for man. One is the joy of receiving and the other is the joy of giving. The special joy one feels when giving cannot be compared with the joy one feels when receiving. If man is to understand whether or not he is making spiritual progress, he must first look within himself to see if he rejoices when he gives and not when he receives; if he's upset when receiving and joyful when giving. Then again, if he's working properly spiritually, he will rarely ever remember the good he has done, but will never forget even the smallest good done to him. He can never ignore the smallest benefaction of others. He may have given an entire vineyard to someone and forgotten about it. But if the other person gives him just one bunch of grapes from that same vineyard, he will never forget it. Or he may have given someone many valuable carved wooden Icons and forgotten about it. But if the receiver later reciprocates by giving him a small Icon made of plastic, he is moved by the gesture, even though it is of such insignificant value, and, out of gratitude, he's already thinking how to repay the favour.

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[7] From the Idiomelon hymn of the 12th Antiphon in the Orthros Service of Great and Holy Friday.

He could give away even an entire Chapel along with the plot of land and still put it out of his mind. In other words, the correct spiritual approach is to forget the good you do to others and to remember the good others do to you. When someone reaches this state of spiritual being, then he is indeed human, a man of God.

But, on the other hand, if someone constantly forgets the good done to him by others and only remembers the good he has done to others, this work is contrary to what Christ seeks from us. But even if one thinks, "You gave me so much and I gave you that much...," this, too, is an unacceptable mentality, grocer-like. I try to give to the person who has the greatest need. I don't reckon things according to a bargaining mentality: he gave me these books and now I owe him the same amount which I must pay in order to be even. Or, if others don't give to me, I won't give them anything either. This too is nothing more than a human form of justice.

He who receives experiences human joy. But he who gives experiences divine joy. Divine joy comes to us by giving. Someone, for example, gives me a book. He now rejoices spiritually, divinely, and I, who receive the book, rejoice humanly. When I, too, give the book, I too will rejoice divinely, while the other person who receives it will rejoice humanly. But if he, too, goes on to give it, then he, too, will rejoice divinely, and so on. Do you see how with one thing alone many people can rejoice both humanly and divinely?

One must learn to rejoice by giving. When he rejoices by giving, he is properly placed and is networking with Christ; he has divine Grace. When he gives or offers something, the joy he feels provides him with divine oxygen. When someone rejoices when he receives or when others are sacrificing themselves for him, this type of joy is full of an asphyxiating stench. The people who offer themselves unconditionally, without any consideration for themselves, will be the ones who will judge us in the future. What wonderful joy these people experience! These are the people Jesus Christ protects. But most people, unfortunately, are only happy when they receive things, so they deprive themselves of any divine joy and remain tormented. Christ is moved when we love our neighbour more than ourselves, and He fills us with divine gladness. You see, He did not restrict Himself to *You shall love your neighbour as yourself,*[8] but went on to sacrifice Himself for mankind.

The Greedy Gather For Others to Find

– Geronda, there are two little brothers; the younger one gives, but the older one doesn't.

– The parents must teach the older child how sweet it is to give. If the older boy works on this, he'll become better and will have an even greater reward than the younger one who's giving by nature.

– Geronda, how can someone get rid of having a closed heart, of his difficulty in giving?

– Why, are you stingy? I'll throw you out! Even with your obedience, for example, if you are in charge of hospitality, go receive a general blessing to be able to give. Don't you see how God Himself is so generous in giving His blessings to all? If someone does not become used to giving, he becomes used to stinginess and then he has difficulty in giving.

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[8] Lev 19:18; Mt 22:39; Mk 12:31; Lk 10:27.

The greedy person becomes a kind of "piggy bank", gathering for others to find. But he loses the joy of giving and of divine reward. Once I told a rich man, "Why do you hoard your money? You have no obligations. What will you do with the money?" "When I die it will all remain here," he told me. But I told him, "I give you a blessing to take it all up there!" "It will all remain here," he said again. "Let others take it when I am dead." "Of course the money will all stay here," I said to him, "but the point is for you to give it away with your own hands while you are still alive." There is no more foolish person than the greedy one, who constantly amasses money and lives in deprivation, only to finally buy his way into hell with his hoarded money. He has lost it all because he doesn't give, and loses himself with material things, and then he loses Jesus Christ.

The miserly person becomes the laughing stock of others. There once was a rich landowner; he owned many fields in the country and apartments in Athens, but was very stingy. Once he prepared a large pot of bean soup for his workers in the fields, but it was very watery. In the past, field labourers worked from sunrise to sunset. At noon when they stopped working to rest a little, the rich man poured the soup into a large pan, and the workers gathered around to have lunch. Sometimes they caught a bean in their spoon and sometimes only some broth! One of the workers, who was a teaser, put down his spoon, stepped to the side, removed his shoes and socks, and pretended to climb into the soup pan. "Hey, what are you doing?" the others told him. "I was thinking of climbing into the pan to try and catch a bean!" he told them with a smile. That's how stingy that landowner was. For this reason, it is a thousand times better for one to be wasteful than miserly.

– Stinginess is an illness, Geronda.

– A very grave illness. If stinginess takes hold of a person, there is no greater illness. It is good to be thrifty, but one must be careful not to be gradually overcome by the spirit of stinginess.

– Geronda, some people are so stingy, they'll even deprive themselves of food.

– Only food? There was a rich merchant with a large variety store, who used to slice flat matches into three parts so he wouldn't waste them! A very rich woman had a sulphur candle; by maintaining burning coals, she used the sulphur candle to light the fire so that she would not have to use a match. And she had houses, fields and much property. I am not saying that people should be wasteful, but at least an extravagant person will more readily give you something if you ask for it. If someone is mean, he will be too stingy to give it up. Once there were two housewives in the neighbourhood discussing salads and vinegars, and one of them said, "I have very good vinegar." One day the other poor woman needed some vinegar and went to ask her neighbour for some. "Look here," the other said, "if I were to be giving it away, I would not have now this vinegar of seven years!" It is good to be thrifty but also to share whatever we may have with those in need. Being thrifty does not mean being miserly. My father didn't hold on to any money. In Pharasa, there was no hotel, but our home was like the town hotel. Whoever came to town would go to the president's house to stay.

There he would be given food, someone would wash his feet, he'd be given clean socks to wear.

Now I see that even in some shrines, they have storage rooms filled with donated vigil lamps, and they won't say, "We have plenty, don't give us any more." The ones they have certainly cannot be used or sold, and still they don't give them away. When someone begins to gather stuff, he becomes so tied up with his possessions that he is unable to give them away. But if someone stops gathering stuff and starts giving them away, then his heart will gather itself around Christ without even realizing it. It is not right for a widow not to have money to buy a yard of material to clothe her children, while I'm hoarding my money and my goods! How can I tolerate this? In my *Kalyvi* I do not have dishes nor pot and pans; I have some little tin cans. I prefer to give away five hundred drachmas to some student to help him go from one monastery to the next than to buy something for myself. If you do not gather, you have a blessing from God. When you give a blessing, you also receive a blessing. One blessing leads to another.

Good Will Is Everything

– Geronda, what about when someone asks for help and I have nothing to give?

– When I wish to give charity and I have nothing to give, then I do charity with "blood". Someone who has wealth and gives material help, experiences some joy, while another who has nothing to give suffers constantly and is humbled, saying, "I have not given any alms." Good will is everything. A rich man has the ability to give and does not give. A poor man wants to give, but does not give because he doesn't have anything to give. The one case is different from the other. If a rich man gives, he will experience a certain degree of joy. The poor man suffers, he wants to give some alms, but has nothing to give and so suffers inside, whereas if he had something to give, he would give it and not suffer. Good will shows in our actions. If someone asks alms from a poor person, and this poor person, even though deprived, offers something – regardless of whether the other person goes out and drinks ouzo with the money given –, then the poor man who gave will have spiritual joy, and God will guide someone else to provide him with material help.

Do you know what great injustice is done sometimes? One person gives all he has in order to help, and the recipient rationalizes the gesture to his liking.

– Geronda, what do you mean?

– Suppose that someone has just five thousand drachmas in his pocket. On his way, he meets a beggar and places all the drachmas in the beggar's hand and leaves. The beggar then sees that he has just received five thousand drachmas and is very happy. At that same time, another very rich person passes by and seeing that the other one gave five thousand drachmas to the beggar, he reasons to himself, "For him to be giving five thousand drachmas at a time, one can only wonder how much money he must have! Certainly he must have millions!" So the very rich man gives five hundred drachmas to the beggar and eases his conscience with the thought that he has done his duty. In fact, the first man only had the five thousand drachmas, and, seeing the beggar, his heart was moved by compassion to give him all his money. If the rich man had also worked spiritually, he would have had the good thought to reason accordingly, "Oh my goodness, he gave the beggar everything he had!" Or maybe he would have said, "He had ten thousand and gave the five thousand drachmas to the beggar." But how can he have any good thoughts about this matter when he does not work at all in a spiritual manner? He simply reasons and says, "For him to be throwing his money away like that, he must be raking it in."

Some people again, while giving five hundred or even a thousand drachmas to a poor person, will start bargaining over five or ten drachmas with the poor labourer who works for him. I can't understand this. You give five hundred or even a thousand drachmas to a stranger, and the person you have beside you, who helps you, you allow to go hungry? This is the person you are obligated to love and help first. But it seems the charity offered by such people is only done to earn praise from others. They will even take someone to court over a thousand drachmas simply because they are thinking in a worldly way and do not wish to be taken for a dupe.

A devout woman related an incident to me.[9] She wanted to buy a load of firewood from an old lady who had travelled three hours to bring it from the forest to town. In fact, that particular time it had taken her three and a half hours, because she had to circle around the lookout post to avoid the Forest Patrol. "How much is the wood?" the woman asked. "Fifteen drachmas," the old lady replied. "No, it's too much; I'll give you eleven drachmas for it." She then went on to tell me, "I bargained with her like this so that people will not take us spiritual people for fools." After that I gave her a piece of my mind, a "thorough dressing down". That poor old lady had two animals and had spent two days gathering the wood in order to make twenty-two drachmas. Instead of offering an extra twenty drachmas for the wood, the greedy woman tried to bargain the price down for just a few drachmas.

Almsgiving Greatly Helps the Departed

Wealth can be very destructive for man when it is not distributed to the poor for the benefit of our soul and for the souls of our departed. Giving alms to people who are suffering, widows, orphans and so on, is also very helpful for the repose of the souls of those who have passed away. For when we give alms on behalf of someone who has died, the recipients will say, "May God forgive him; may his relics be sanctified." If someone happens to be sick, unable to work and in debt, and at this difficult time you offer him help and say, "Take this for the sake of the soul of so and so", he, too, will say, "May God forgive him; may his relics be sanctified!" They say a heartfelt prayer, and it is this that helps a lot those who have fallen asleep.

– If a woman's husband dies without having received Holy Communion, without having made his final Confession, or if her child was killed in an accident, what else can she do to help their souls?

– She should try and improve herself as much as possible. This will naturally help her personally, but it will also help her departed husband, for since they have been inseparably crowned as husband and wife, he, too, has a share in his wife's spiritual improvement. This, of course, is most important of all, that she improve her spiritual life. Otherwise, she may do some charitable work and still maintain her old bad habits. She may say, "I have done my duty; what else do you want me to do?" So, she remains her same old self and may even become worse.

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[9] In 1958.

"Giving Alms in Secret"[10]

– Geronda, some people consider it to be Pharisaism when someone goes to Church but is devoid of love and sacrifice.

– But how do they know this? Are they certain of this?

– That is how they see it.

– What did Christ say? Did He say you should judge?[11] Somebody may not give to a gypsy because he intends to help some other sick person who is in great need. The gypsy will receive something from another passer-by, but the sick person may not. How then can they jump to conclusions without knowing? Pharisaism is the practice of some people who do their good works in the open so that other people can praise them.

I remember when I was at the idiorhythmic Monastery[12] in 1957, they provided a certain 'blessing' (a kind of gratuity), depending on the difficulty of each obedience which each monk had undertaken. Because in those days there were shortages of manpower in the monasteries, there were some Fathers who had the strength to assume several obediences, for which they received additional blessings but would then give them away. There was a monk who was called "*Spangos*" (Stingy), because he was tight and was not known to give. When he died, many poor people gathered at his funeral from Chalkidiki, *Megali Panaghia*, Palaiochori, Neochori, and they were mourning him. These people had oxen to transport their lumber, which then was transported by oxen – unlike today when we use big three-axle trucks. Now, what had that monk done? He had saved all the money provided to him for the obediences he had undertaken, and whenever he found a family who only had one ox or whose ox had died, he would give them the money to buy one. It was a big thing then to be able to buy an ox; they cost about five thousand drachmas, which was a lot in those days. The other Fathers would openly give five drachmas to some poor person, ten to another, even twenty drachmas to still another. But this monk did everything in secret, and no one knew what he was doing. He saved the money and gave it away in large sums to the needy families. Everybody called him "Stingy" because they thought he was tight with his money. Finally, when he died, the poor people who he had helped came to his funeral to mourn him, saying, "He saved us, he saved us..." In those days if someone had an ox he could transport lumber and provide for his family. The Fathers were amazed by their fellow monk who did his charity in secret. That's why I say, how can you possibly know what is going on in the heart and mind of other people?

– Geronda, what is wrong when someone gives alms but feels empty inside?

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[10] Mt 6:4.

[11] Cf. Mt 7:1; Lk 6:37; Jn 7:24.

[12] A Monastery where the monks live together without a common abbot, but who follow an individual program in their spiritual and communal life.

– He should reflect whether he is acting out of a need to be liked by others. When the motives for almsgiving are pure, then we feel joy. Do you know what they did in some town once? This was told to me by a devout attorney I knew. Christmas was approaching and a few Christians decided to gather various things, bundle them into packages and take them to the public square to distribute them to the poor – it was after the German Occupation when people were in dire need. The attorney advised them, "Since we know who the poor families are, it'd be better if we distributed the packages quietly to each family directly." "No," they said, "we must distribute the packages in the public square for the glory of God, so people can see that we care for the poor." "But this is not right," he told them again. "Where is it written that charity should be given like this?" The group wanted their way ...*for the glory of God*. The devout attorney could not change their minds, and left them to it. They gathered the packages in the town's main square and announced that the packages would be distributed there. Certain greedy, rough and uncouth characters came quickly and gathered up the packages for themselves, even though they had no need, while the poor remained empty-handed. When the donors tried to intervene, they were handed roughly by the shady characters *for the glory of God*! You see how the spiritual laws work? A secular person can be proud and publicly announce his plans, but how can this ever be justified for spiritual people?

– Geronda, are there people who do not believe, but who are still kind and do charitable work?

– When a worldly person gives out of a pure disposition and not out of a need to be liked by others, then God will

not ignore him, but will find a way to speak to his heart. Someone I know, who lived in Switzerland, told me of the following incident: A rich atheist woman was so kind and compassionate that she distributed all of her property to the poor and suffering, and ended up becoming very poor herself. Then the people who she had helped saw to it that she was placed in the best nursing home. In spite of all her charity, she remained an atheist. When people tried to speak to her about Christ, she refused to discuss the matter. She insisted that Christ was nothing more than a good man, a social worker, and other similar theories. Perhaps even the Christians she happened to meet or know did not help her to be moved by their life. My friend asked me to pray for the soul of that woman. In any case, my friend also prayed fervently for that woman to find her faith in God. After a considerable time had passed, my friend informed me what had finally happened: "One day, when I went to visit her in the nursing home, I found her completely changed. 'I believe! I believe!' she cried out joyfully." Some event had occurred in her life that had changed her. Later she asked to be baptized.

"In So Doing Thou Shalt Heap Coals of Fire Upon His Head"[13]

– Geronda, when someone is not needy but pretends to be, should we help him?

– Christ said, *We should give to him who begs from us without examining.*[14] Even if someone who begs from you is not in need, you should still give to him. Be happy in giving to him. God Himself *maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust,*[15] so why should we not help our neighbour? Are we worthy of all the gifts granted to us by God? God *does not deal with us according to our sins, nor reward us according to our iniquities.*[16] Is some poor person asking you for help? Even if you doubt his situation, you should still help him discreetly so that you are not tempted by negative thoughts. Do you know what Abba Isaac says? *If someone on horseback should stretch out his hand and ask alms of you, do not refuse him, for at that moment he is certainly in need.*[17] You never know what state he may be in. You should believe what the other person tells you and give as you are asked.

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[13] Rom 12:20.

[14] Cf. Mt 5:42; Lk 6:30.

If we have, for example, only one thousand drachmas and we give them to a poor person and are troubled for not having more to give, then in addition to the blessing (the money given), we also place Christ and a good restlessness into his conscience. This action of ours will trouble him, because he will constantly be thinking about the merciful person who, together with the one thousand drachmas, also gave him his compassionate heart. This may force him to return anonymously the money exacted or even more. Something similar has happened to me.

Once when I was in Thessaloniki a woman stopped me – she appeared to be a gypsy – and asked for money for her children, because her husband was sick. I only

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[15] Mt 5:45.

[16] Ps 103:10 (Ps 102:10 LXX).

[17] See Saint Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies*, Homily 4, p. 37.

had a five-hundred drachma note, and I gave it to her. “Please forgive me,” I told her, “but I do not have any more to give you. If you like, take my address and write to me how your husband is doing, and I will try to send you some more money from the Holy Mountain.” After a short time I received a letter containing five hundred drachmas and the following note, “Thank you for your kindness; I am returning the money you gave me.”

When someone gives alms with a truly compassionate heart, the beggar is touched by the authentic love, by Christ, and will himself begin to give rather than to gather. But even if the beggar is very hard-hearted and continues to gather, he himself will not enjoy what he has gathered, for God will ensure the money finds its rightful place, and the beggar will be left with only the weariness and the trouble of the collection (let us call it that) which he took for others.

– Geronda, how much then should someone give?

– Someone should give as much as will not trouble his conscience. Discernment is important. He should not give one hundred and then be sorry that he did not give fifty. Much attention is needed when someone has love with a lot of enthusiasm. It is then good to be a little conservative with his love and enthusiasm, so that he will not regret having given too much to an unfortunate person, when less could have been given, and thus be left empty-handed himself. Gradually he can acquire experience and give according to the self-renunciation he has.

– Geronda, if someone asks for unreasonable things, should we give in?

– In that case, one needs discernment and even more discernment. If someone asks you for things just to have and admire them, let him have them. You see, Jesus Christ did not say to Judas, "What kind of an Apostle are you? Get rid of your avarice!" Instead, He made him treasurer.[18] But if, for example, someone asks you to give him a tin of marmalade, which you have, and you know that he has a whole case of it when another person has none and needs some, then tell the person who has and is asking for more, "Brother, if you like, why don't you also give a little to so and so who has none." If there is no one who is in need, then give it without telling him anything, since he has asked you for it. Perhaps this offering, if there is a chord of sensitivity in the recipient, will move him to correct himself.

In these cases we apply what Saint Paul said, *When your enemy harms you and you in turn do him good, you place burning coals upon his head.*[19] This does not mean that you actually burn him, but, when you do good to him, then the love which is Christ begins to work in him, and divine Grace is activated. Then the man can be transformed, because his conscience bothers him, that is, he is burnt by his conscience. But it is not right to do good for the purpose of censuring another and forcing him to be prudent; for this weakens the good done. Good should be done with love. When you avenge the wrong with kindness and goodness, then the person can be changed in the good sense and be corrected.

In Konitsa, there was a drunkard who had a family, and I used to give him something. Some people had learned that I was helping him, because he himself would tell them, and they told me, "Don't give to him; he drinks." But he would tell me, "Give me something for my children," and when giving I would say to him, "Take this for your children." I knew that he drank, but I also knew that this word would also help a little. He would drink but he would also think of his children a little. If I had not given him anything, he would have tormented his wife and taken the money she earned by working as a cleaning lady to drink and cause even greater suffering to his children. But when I told him, "Take this for your children," he did remember his children a little. You see? I felt pain for him and his family, and this was obvious to him and was active in his inner being. Many have been helped in this manner. Some, because their conscience troubled them, would send the money back.

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[18] Cf. Jn 12:6.

[19] Cf. Rom 12:20; Pr 25:21-22.

By reasoning we do not allow Christ to do His work. It is time to learn the true Gospel, to be truly Evangelical persons, not Protestants!

PART THREE

SPIRITUAL BRAVERY

"The sublime joy comes from sacrifice.
Only when one sacrifices himself
is he related to Christ,
for Christ is sacrifice."

Trapeza
[illegible]
[illegible]
p. 218

CHAPTER ONE

The Signs of the Times[1]

The Antichrist

Geronda, tell us something about the Antichrist.

– Let us for once say something about Christ... We must be as close to Christ as we can. Will we be afraid of the Antichrist if we are united with Christ? Isn't the antichrist spirit present today? One way or another, evil is done by the antichrist spirit. And even if an antichrist monster is created to do some horrible things, in the end he will be ridiculed. But many events will take place. Perhaps you, too, will live to see many of the signs written in the Book of Revelation. Gradually some of these signs are emerging. I have been speaking out for so many years now. The situation is terrible, unimaginable! The foolishness has exceeded all boundaries. Apostasy is here, and now *the son of perdition*[2] is expected to come. It will be a madhouse. In the prevailing turmoil, every nation will rise up to do whatever it wants. May God put out His hand so the interests of the great powers will be such that they might be helpful. Every so often we will hear of something new. We will see the most incredible things, the most irrational things happening. But these events will occur and pass quickly.

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[1] Whatever is written in this chapter has been said or written between the years 1981-1994.

[2] 2 Thess 2:3.

Ecumenism, the European Union, one huge nation, one religion made to fit – these are the schemes of the devil. The Zionists are preparing someone to be the Messiah. For them the Messiah is a king who will reign here on earth. The Jehovah's Witnesses are also looking toward an earthly king. The Zionists will present someone and the Jehovah's Witnesses will accept him. They will say, "He is the one." There will be great confusion. In that confusion, everyone will be looking for a Messiah to save them. And then they will present some who will say, "I am the Imam, I am the fifth Buddha, I am the Christ expected by the Christians, I am the one expected by the Jehovah's Witnesses, I am the Messiah of the Jews." He will have five "selves"...

When John the Evangelist says in the First Epistle, *Little children ... as you heard that Antichrist cometh, even now have there arisen many antichrists...*,[3] he does not mean that the anticipated Antichrist will be like the persecutors Maximinian or Diocletian. Rather, the anticipated Antichrist will, in some manner, be the incarnate devil, who will present himself to the Jewish nation as the Messiah and will mislead the world. Difficult years are ahead; we will be tested very severely. The Christians will suffer great persecution. And, you see, people are not at all aware that we are living during the signs of

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[3] 1 Jn 2:18.

the times, that the sealing is already advancing. It is as if nothing is happening. This is why the Sacred Scripture says that even the elect will be deceived.[4] Those without a good disposition will not be enlightened and will be misled during the years of apostasy. For whoever does not have divine Grace, does not have spiritual clarity, just like the devil.

– Geronda, do the Zionists believe what is said about the Antichrist?

– They would like to govern the whole world. To achieve their goal, they will use even sorcery and satanism. They see the worship of Satan as a power that will help them achieve their goals. They will seek to govern the world with satanic power. They do not consider God in their schemes. But will they be blessed by God in their efforts? God will bring a lot of good out of this situation. Some other satanic theories at least held sway for about seventy years; but they won't even last for seven years.

– Geronda, when I hear about the Antichrist, I feel a fear inside of me.

– What do you fear? Will he be more terrible than the devil? He is a man after all. Saint Marina used to beat the devil, and Saint Justina dispelled so many demons. After all, we didn't come in this world to have an easy life.

The Earthly King of the Jews

A sign marking the fulfilment of the prophecies will be the destruction of the mosque of Omar in Jerusalem. They will tear it down to rebuild the Temple of Solomon, which, as they say, was built on that site. Ultimately the Zionists will install the Antichrist there as the Messiah. I have heard that the Jews are already preparing to rebuild the Temple of Solomon.

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[4] Cf. Mt 24:24; Mk 13:22.

– Geronda, how is it that Jews read the Old Testament but do not believe in Christ?

– Why don't you go and ask the Jews? The Jews were always fanatical. They do understand, but it is their egoism that blinds them. If they only had paid a little attention to the Sacred Scripture, no one would remain a Jew.

– How did they interpret what they read?

– Indeed, how did they and how do they interpret Sacred Scripture! They turn spiritual meanings into material ones. For example, you should see how they interpret Prophet Isaiah's *the desert shall blossom.*[5] In order to show that the desert has indeed blossomed, they altered the course of a stream, built irrigation systems, planted gardens, banana trees, lemon trees, orange trees, they created orchards and gardens everywhere so they can say, *The desert has blossomed*! That is how they interpret everything. But the words of the Prophet actually refer to the spiritual renewal of the world through the Holy Spirit, through the Baptism of regeneration.

– Are they now expecting the earthly king?

– Yes, the Antichrist. The Rabbis know that the Messiah has already come and that they have crucified Him. I have learned from a person that when a Jew is dying, the Rabbi goes and whispers in his ear, "The Messiah has come." You see, their conscience seems to trouble them by a sense of culpability, and yet they do not humble themselves.

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[5] Isa 35:1-2.

– And what do they gain by saying that to the dying?

– Nothing. They just say it because their conscience is troubling them and they think that by saying it to the dying they will be all right.

– And other people don't hear this?

– No, it is whispered in the ear. The Jewish youth have revolted against the Rabbis. "The Messiah has come," they say, "what Messiah are you waiting for?" In America there is a group of young Jews who study Sacred Scripture historically and publish a journal in which they write, "The Messiah has come. We will send this journal free of charge to whoever doesn't believe that the Messiah has come, until they do believe. Whoever believes should send us their subscription fee to help us send the journal to others so they will also believe."

– Are these people Jews?

– Yes, they are Jews.

– Have they become Christians?

– Well, for now it suffices that they have believed the Messiah has come.

– Can it be that there are Rabbis who are crypto-Christians?

– Rabbis who are crypto-Christians? Can any one who has become a Christian remain a Rabbi? That is, a Rabbi who teaches his fellow Jews that the Messiah has not yet come and, when they are dying, to whisper in their ear that the Messiah has come?

The 666 seal

– Geronda, how soon will these events take place?

– They are delayed because of you and because of me, so we may be able to acquire a good spiritual state. God is being patient, because if they were to occur now you and I would be lost. Nowhere in the teaching of Christ is there a specific reference to time.[6] However, Sacred Scripture does say that the signs of the times will warn us of their coming.[7] We must always be ready and shall see them when the time nears. Then we will be more certain. *Time and experience will reveal (the events) to those who are vigilant.*[8]

A book came to my attention, which had on its cover three large sixes! This was done to present the six nicely and to familiarize people with it. In time, little by little, the seal will come as well.

– Geronda, even the fasteners sown on clothes are sold in packages that bear the number 666.

– That devil is at work everywhere! That number has been on credit cards for some time. Now it is on the fasteners! Many use the 666 as a trademark to sell more of their products. One supports the other. In other words, one 666 company will prefer another 666 company. It has been written that when the depiction of a snake biting its tail is published, this will mean that the Jews have taken control of the world. For now, they have put it on a few currency bills. The number 666 has already been a hit in China, in India!

– Geronda, how do people know about using this number?

– Saint John the Evangelist knew what the devil was planning to do, just as the Prophets foretold that Christ would be betrayed for *thirty pieces of silver*,[9] that He would be given vinegar to drink,[10] that His garments would be divided.[11] Two thousand years ago he wrote in the Book of Revelation that people would be marked with the number 666. *He that hath understanding, let him count the number of the beast; for it is a number of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty and six.*[12] For the Jews the number 666 is a symbol of economy. As mentioned in the Old Testament, the Israelites imposed a specific tax upon the people they conquered through various wars. The annual amount of the tax was 666 talents of gold.[13] Now, to subdue the whole world, they are again imposing this taxation number, which is connected with their glorious past. That's why they don't want to replace it with another number. In other words, the number 666 is the symbol of Mammon. They borrowed it from the weights of gold – not knowing what Saint John says about it in the Book of Revelation – but, nevertheless, it still refers to Mammon. The Gospel says it clearly: Either Christ or Mammon. *You cannot serve God and Mammon.*[14]

Events are progressing accordingly. In America, marked dogs transmit a signal and can be located in no time at all wherever they might be. So they know where each dog is at. Dogs that do not have an identifying mark, and are found without an owner are killed by laser. Later they'll start killing people, too.

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[6] Cf. Mt 24:36; Mk 13:32; Acts 1:7; 1 Thess 5:1.

[7] Cf. Mt 24:29 f.; Mk 13:24 f.; Lk 21:25 f.

[8] Saint Andrew Archbishop of Caesarea, *Interpretation of the Revelation of Saint John the Apostle, Evangelist and Theologian*, ch. 38, P. G. 106:340C.

[9] Cf. Zech 11:1-13.

[10] Cf. Ps 69:21 (Ps 68:22 LXX).

[11] Cf. Ps 22:18 (Ps 21:19 LXX).

[12] Rev 13:18.

[13] Cf. 1 Kg 10:14; 2 Chr 9:13.

[14] Mt 6:24.

Tons of fish have been marked and are being observed through satellites to study their migration patterns. And now a vaccine has been developed to combat a new disease, which will be obligatory and those taking it will be marked. Many people there are already marked with some sort of laser beam, on the forehead, on the arm. Later on, anyone who is not marked with the number 666 will not be able to either buy or sell, to get a loan, to get a job, and so forth. My thinking tells me that this is the system through which the Antichrist has chosen to take over the whole world, and people who are not part of this system won't be able to find work and so on, – whether black or white or red; in other words, everyone he will take over through an economic system that controls the global economy, and only those who have accepted the seal, the mark of the number 666, will be able to participate in business dealings.

But what will become of the people who are sealed! An expert was telling me that laser beams are harmful to people. People who are marked will attract the rays of the sun and suffer such harm that they will gnaw their tongues in pain.[15] Those who are not sealed will have a better fate than the others, because Christ will help those who are not sealed. And this is no small matter.

– Geronda, when will Christ help them? Later?

– No, right then.

– Geronda, if they are not able to buy and sell, how will they be better off?

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[15] Cf. Rev 16:10.

– You see, God has a way, and I know something about it. Well, this matter has preoccupied me a great deal and then He sent me the ... telegram. Oh how God provides for us indeed!

– Geronda, why is the seal also called an inscription or engraving?

– Because the seal will not be superficial. What does "engraving" mean? Does it not mean deeply incised straight lines? The seal will be a slash, placed first on all the products and then in time, with laser beams, it will be enforced on people, too, on their hand or their forehead. Two years ago I spoke with a doctor from Toronto about this sealing and now he tells me that, according to a newspaper article he read, instead of an ID card, they will require some sort of impression on the hand.[16] Things are progressing, but we cannot exactly say that this or that will be done.

Again, certain television sets, which have recently been imported into Greece, have a component, which can observe those watching the television. Soon those who have a television will be watching their television, and, at the same time, they themselves will be watched! That is, those watching will be watched. Their whole life, what they say, what they do, everything, will be monitored through computers. Do you see what a dictatorship the devil has devised! In Brussels, there is an entire building with the 666, where they house the computer. That computer can monitor billions of people – the entire population of the world is approximately six billion. Confession for everyone at the push of a button! Some Europeans have resisted these developments because they fear a global dictatorship. We, the Orthodox Christians, resist these developments, because we do not want the Antichrist – nor the dictatorship, of course. Serious events are awaiting us, but they will not stand for long. Just as Orthodox Christianity was not wiped out by Communism and other enemies in the past, so it will not be wiped out now.

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[16] The Elder is referring to the technology of palm-scanning.

The New ID Cards

– Geronda, someone said, "We use the five-thousand drachma currency note which bears the number 666, don't we? It's just going to be the same with the new identification cards."

– The five-thousand drachma note is currency – and the English gold sovereign bears the image of Queen Victoria; this doesn't bother me. *Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's.*[17] But this is about my identification card. It is something personal; it is not a mere currency note. Identification means what the word says: a person is identified personally by what that card states. The card contains the devil and I sign that I accept it. How can I do that?

– Geronda, what is the relationship between the ID card and the seal?

– The ID card is not the seal; it is the introduction to the seal.

– Geronda, people are asking what to do about the new ID cards.

– When people ask you, it is better to advise them to

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[17] Mt 22:21; Mk 12:17.

consult with their Spiritual Fathers and to be patient until we see how the Church responds to this matter. Many are asking questions, but few understand the answers. Since I have written about this clearly in the pamphlet *The Signs of the Times*, let each act according to his conscience. A few people have said of course, "Well, that is the opinion of one monk; it is not the Church's position." But I did not express my own opinion; I simply stated the words of Christ, of the Gospel, because our opinion must be subject to the will of God as recorded in the Gospel. Others, who say the opposite of what I said, claim that Father Paisios said it. Still others who hear such things, seeing that they are such very serious matters, do not bother to ask if that is what I really said, but just believe whatever they hear. I am not afraid to speak the truth openly. Some people come to my *Kalyvi* and throw sixes in the box. That is nothing, after all. But once they threw a sign outside my door. I thought someone had come and not found me and had written a sign, "He's out," so others would see it. Then I looked and saw the most abusive words, which I had not heard even as a layman. This whole present situation will be swept away, but first we will go through stormy times. People are roused and we, too, must rise up with much prayer.

Some people are concerned over the matter of the ID cards, while others are exploiting the issue in order to create problems. The Church must take a correct position. She must speak out and explain to the faithful so that they will understand that, if they accept the new ID, it will amount to a spiritual fall. The Church must also ask the State to at least not make the new ID cards obligatory. If the Church takes a serious position, and the State respects the freedom of choice of the faithful, then whoever wants can have a new ID card, and those who want to keep the old one can do so. In this case, the strong-willed who keep the old card will have to endure the abuse of the many who will oppose them. Most people will just go about their business. Those who wish to be served will have the new cards, and the other poor people, the devout, will have the old identification card and will have to endure hardships.

Now that the minister has promised not to place the 666 on the new ID cards, visibly or invisibly, that, too, is something. We'll be patient and things will clear up in time. It is something even to say that they will not put the 666 on the cards. They themselves deny it, but we'll see what they do in the end. By the time the new ID cards come out, it is entirely possible that we may have the wrath of God upon us. After all, it is not likely that everyone will have to have a new ID card within twenty-four hours. Let's wait to see the first ones that come out. They will be examined, and if the minister reneges on his word, then the struggle will be a righteous one. If we continue the demonstrations now, they will claim, "Look, they are shouting and creating trouble without reason." A dog, if it is a good guard dog, will bark when the thief comes. When the thief leaves, the dog stops barking. If it continues to bark, then it is not a good guard dog.

– Geronda, it was also said by the authorities that since we have religious tolerance in our country, the religion of each person should not be written on the new ID cards.

– Yes, this does not interest them, but it certainly interests me, because this is what identifies me. The card must state where I am from and what I am. If religion is not included in the card there will be problems. For example, someone will go to the town hall for a marriage license. If his ID card says "Orthodox" – regardless of how good a Christian he really is – then it will be alright. But if it does not state the religion, how can they give out a marriage license? For the Church this will become a complicated issue. Now, if religion is stated on an optional basis, this would also be a sort of confession. Europe is Europe. Here things are different.

The Insidious Way of Introducing the Seal

Little by little, after the credit card and the ID card, that is, after the personal "record" of each person, they will proceed insidiously to the seal. Through various cunning means, they will compel people to accept the seal on the forehead or on the arm. They will force the issue and say, "You can only use the card; currency will be abolished." People will give their card to the stores to buy what they need, and the merchant will get his money from the bank. Whoever does not have a card will not be able to buy or sell. On the other hand, they will begin promoting "the other more perfect system" by marking every person with the 666, using laser beams on the forehead or the arm, which will not be visible on the outside. At the same time, they will show on television that so and so stole the card of so and so and took all his money from the bank. And then they will add, "The most secure system is to have the seal on our forehead or arm with a laser beam, because only the bearer of this seal will know his or her own personal number. Sealing is the most secure system. No one can take our head or our arm, nor will anybody be able to see the seal embedded in us." That's why they let thieves and other criminals to rampage. Fifteen monastic cells were robbed near Karyes. One person was killed while being robbed. So, people will find an opportunity to violate laws and traditions and take whatever they want. Let us say, for example, that someone wants to encroach on somebody's field and claims that it once belonged to his grandfather who had rented it to some shepherds as a pasture for their sheep, and you cannot verify this. Then, the authorities will say, "Unfortunately, as it is, we cannot check the facts; we can only do this with the computer." And then they will proceed with the sealing. The computer will then do the search to find out whether or not someone is or is not marked and sealed so they can be helped with ~~their~~ problem or not.

The three and a half years[18] will be difficult, during which the ~~few who do not agree~~ with this system will endure hardships. Some excuse will be discovered to throw these people in jail. After a year, they will be taken to another city for questioning and more legal proceedings, going from one city to another. Finally the authorities will say, "We're sorry, you are innocent after all. If only you had been sealed, we would have been able to gather the necessary information in a minute. Now we cannot check the facts."

– Geronda, will they be able to impose the seal on everybody by force?

– They are too "refined" to do that! They'll be courteous about it – after all, they are Europeans! They will display

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[18] Cf. Dan 9:27; Rev 12:6 and 13:5. See also St Irenaeus Lugdunensis, *Adversus haereses,* book 5, Sources Chrétiennes 153, Paris 1969, p. 323 and 387.

some superiority. They won't torture people but anyone who is not sealed will simply not be able to live normally in society. They will then again say, "Your troubles come from not being sealed; if you accept the seal, you will not have these difficulties." If any one happens to have gold sovereigns or dollars, he will not be able to use them. So if you can now learn to live simply and frugally, you will be able to get through those difficult years. It will be helpful to have a small field, to cultivate some wheat or potatoes; to have a few olive trees, and then with some farm animals, a goat, a few chickens you will be able to provide for the needs of your family. For even if you were to stockpile various groceries, this would not do because such foods do not keep; they spoil quickly. Naturally, these difficult times will be short, three to three and a half years.[19] The time will be shortened for the sake of the elect.[20] They will not realize how quickly the time will pass. God will not leave man without help.

– Geronda, will Christ intervene during these difficult years?

– Yes. The Saints, *Panaghia*, Christ will appear to save even one wronged man with a good disposition, because he deserves divine help, and even more so when the whole world will be going through such a difficult time. Now it will be a passing storm, a short occupation by the Antichrist Satan. He will then be given such a slap by Christ, all the nations will be shaken up and then peace will prevail in the world for a long time. During this time, Christ will provide the opportunity for His creation to be saved. Is Christ going to abandon His creation? No, He will appear when mankind has reached an impasse and will save it from the clutches of the Antichrist. People will return to Christ and a spiritual serenity will prevail over all the earth for many years. Some people associate the Second Coming of Christ with this intervention of His. My thinking tells me that this will not be the Second Coming of Christ when He comes as Judge, but only an intervention of Christ, for there are so many events that have not taken place.

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[19] *Ibid.* (see note 18).

[20] Cf. Mt 24:22; Mk 13:20.

Christ will intervene, slap down this whole system, prevail over all evil and transform it into good in the end. The roads will be filled with many shrines of devotion. The buses will have Icons on their billboards. All the people will believe, and will want you to tell them about Jesus Christ! Thus the Gospel will be proclaimed throughout the whole world,[21] and then Christ will come as Judge to judge the world. Judgment is one thing and intervention to help His creation is another.

Sealing Equals Denial

While the Evangelist John clearly refers to the ingrained seal in the Book of Revelation,[22] some people just do not understand. What can you tell them? Unfortunately, one hears so many foolish ideas of the brain from certain "Gnostics" of the day. One says, "I will accept the ID card with the number 666 and will place a cross on it." Another says, "I will accept the seal on the forehead

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[21] Cf. Mt 24:14; Mk 13:10.

[22] Cf. Rev 13:16 f., 14:9 f., 16:2, 20:4.

but will put a cross on my forehead as well" and so many other similar foolish notions. They think that such things sanctify, when in fact they are spiritual errors.

A bishop told me, "Next to the spot where I will sign my name, I will also put the sign of the cross. I am not denying Christ, I am only trying to serve my needs." I told him, "You being a bishop, it's alright for you to sign your name with a cross, and he, being an archimandrite priest, can also sign his name with a cross; but what will the poor people do?" What is unclean cannot be sanctified. Clean water is receptive of Grace and is sanctified. Urine cannot become holy water. A stone may be turned into bread through a miracle. But an unclean thing is not receptive of sanctification. As such, the devil, Antichrist, when he is on our ID card or on our forehead or our arm with his symbol, cannot be sanctified by placing a cross there. We have the power of the Precious Cross, the Holy Symbol, the divine Grace of Christ, and only when we preserve the Grace of our Holy Baptism, through which we deny Satan, are we united to Christ and receive the Holy Seal, *The Seal of the Gift of the Holy Spirit*. Do you see how they are trying to proceed with rational thinking ... put a cross next to their name and everything will be all right! And while we see that the Apostle Peter externally denied Christ, and this, too, was a denial,[23] these rationalists deny the Holy Seal of Christ which was given to them in Holy Baptism, by accepting the seal of the Antichrist and even claiming that they still have Christ in them!!

– Geronda, what happens if someone accepts the seal out of ignorance?

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[23] Cf. Mt 26:69-75; Mk 14:66-72; Lk 22:54-62; Jn 18:16-18, 25-27.

– It will be out of indifference, not ignorance. How can there be ignorance when things are so clear? And even if someone does not know, he must be interested to find out and to learn. If we claim that we did not know and for this reason accepted the seal, then Christ will tell us sternly, O *ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky, but can ye not discern the signs of the times.*[24] When even out of ignorance someone receives the sign, he loses the divine Grace and receives the influence of demonic energy. You see, when the child is immersed in the baptismal water by the priest during Holy Baptism, he receives the Holy Spirit without knowing it, and divine Grace dwells in him from then on.

Interpreting the Prophecies

– Geronda, some people say, "Whatever is written by God, that is what will happen. Why then should we be concerned?"

– Yes, they say that, my child, but it is not how it is! I, too, hear some people saying, "The Jews are not such fools as to be betrayed by the 666, when the Evangelist John writes about it in the Book of Revelation. If they were, they would have done it in a smarter, more secretive manner." But can we say that the Scribes and Pharisees did not know the Old Testament? Didn't Annas and Caiaphas know better than anyone that in the Old Testament it was written that the Messiah would be betrayed for *thirty pieces of silver*?[25] Why didn't they ask for thirty-one or twenty-nine and instead asked for "thirty"? But they were blind. God knew that things would happen in this way. God foreknows but does not predestine – only the Turks believe in what is written, in kismet. God knows that something will happen in a particular way, but man still does it out of his foolishness. It is not a matter of God having made a specific decision, but He sees the evil deeds of men and where it will lead them, and knows that their minds will not change. Again, it is not a matter of God arranging things to happen in a particular manner.

Other people are preoccupied with prophecies and devise their own interpretation. They do not say, at least, "This is my opinion about this matter," but they state unequivocally, "This is how it is," and then go on to relate many theories of their own. Some will interpret the prophecies to their liking in order to justify their passions. An example of this is the statement made by Saint Cyril, *It would be better if the signs of the Antichrist did not take place in our times.*[26] Someone who wants to justify himself, his cowardice, will say, "Ah, you see? Saint Cyril was afraid he might deny Christ if he had to face the dangers of the Antichrist; am I any better than Saint Cyril? Therefore, even if I should deny Christ under such conditions, it is of no consequence..." Of course, Saint Cyril said that the events should not happen so that his eyes would not see the Antichrist, and not that he was afraid of him. Do you see what the devil can do?

Again certain "Gnostics", unfortunately, wrap up their spiritual children with swaddling-bands as if they were

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[24] Mt 16:3.

[25] Cf. Zech 11:11-13.

[26] Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses, Catechism 15, For the Enlightened,* ch. 18, ed. Etoimasia, Kareas 1991, p. 319.

infants, presumably to protect them from worrying. "This does not matter; that is not important. As long as you believe inside..." Or they may advise them, "Do not talk about this subject – about the ID cards, the seal –, so as not to upset people." On the contrary, if they tell them, "Let's try to live more spiritually; let's be close to Christ; don't be afraid of anything; and in the final reckoning we'll go as true witnesses and martyrs," then at least they will be better prepared. When we know the truth, we are given the opportunity to be troubled, to ask questions. We are pained by the present condition, we pray more fervently, and we are careful not to fall into a spiritual trap.

But now what? Besides giving their own interpretations, some are also fearful like worldly people, when these spiritual teachers should be troubled spiritually over the situation and should be helping the Christians by instilling in them a positive concern and by strengthening their faith to find divine consolation. I ask myself: are they not troubled by all these events which are taking place in our society and in our time? Why don't they put even one question mark against the interpretations of their mind? And if they themselves render indirect assistance to the Antichrist regarding the seal, how can they mislead other souls toward perdition? When Sacred Scripture says, *To lead astray, if possible, the elect,*[27] it means that the people who try to interpret these matters with their own mind can readily go astray into error.

Therefore behind the perfect system of "the service card", the security computer, the sinister global dictatorship is lurking, the Antichrist's slavery. *And he causeth all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free and the bond, that there be given them a mark on their right hand, or upon their forehead; and that no man should be able to buy or to sell, save he that hath the mark, even the name of the beast or the number of his name. Here is wisdom: He that hath understanding, let him count the number of the beast; for it is the number of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty and six.*[28]

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[27] Mk 13:22.

[28] Rev 13:16-18.

CHAPTER TWO

Sacrifice Brings Joy

Nowadays Sacrifice Is Rare

A woman who had everything told me once that having children is a dizzying bother. She couldn't be bothered to be a mother! When a mother thinks like that, she becomes useless, for mothers, after all, are supposed to have love naturally. Before having her own family, a young woman may be woken up by her mother at ten in the morning. But from the moment she becomes a mother and has to feed and bathe her child, she won't even sleep at night, because the heart starts working. When a person has a sense of sacrifice, he does not complain, he is not lazy; he rejoices. That's the key, to have a spirit of sacrifice. If that woman had said, "Oh Lord, how can I thank you? You have not only given me children, but also many material goods... So many people have nothing and I have houses, I have property from my father, my husband earns a good salary, and I receive two more salaries from rents, and I have an easy life! How can I thank you my God? I am not worthy of these things." If she thought like this, then by praising God she would stop feeling sorry for herself. In other

words, it would have been enough if she had only been grateful to God.

– Geronda, sacrifice gives us joy.

– Oh, what joy it brings! Nowadays people don't savour this joy of sacrifice, and this is why they are tormented. They have no ideals in them; they are too bored to live. A generous heart and self-denial are what drive us. Without this force, we are tormented. In the old days, in the villages, some people would go out at night unseen to quietly open up a pathway for others to bless and forgive them when they died. Now one seldom encounters this spirit of sacrifice.

I remember a festive procession around the Monastery on the Holy Mountain. As the monks walked close by a large bramble bush, their monastic veils would get snagged on a branch. Not one of them stopped for a minute to break it off and get it out of the way for the sake of the others behind; instead, each stooped under it to avoid getting snagged. Were they bowing to the bramble bush? If it were the Sacred Bramble Bush, then it would have been appropriate. People tend to think, "Let someone else take care of the problem, I'll just do my own work." But why don't you take care of it, since you were the first to notice? That is what worldly people who do not believe in God do. I have no use for such a life; I would rather die a thousand deaths. The goal is for each one of us to think of the other person, of the other person's pain.

People seem to have lost control. The sense of *philotimo*, of sacrifice, is gone. I have often told you how it was with me then with the hernia at the *Kalyvi*... When someone rang the bell on the door, I would go and open the door, even in the snow. If someone had a serious problem, then I would not even feel my own pain, even though I had previously been sick enough for bed. I would also offer them some treat, holding the treat with one hand and the hernia with the other. Throughout our conversation, even though the pain was severe, I would not lean on anything so as not to reveal my discomfort. When the visitor left, I would again collapse from the pain. It was not that before my own pain had passed or that I had been miraculously cured, but, in feeling the other person's pain, I forgot my own. The miracle happens when someone can be compassionate and feel the other's pain. The whole idea here is to be able to see the other person as a brother and feel his pain. It is this very pain that moves God and brings about the miracle. For there is nothing else which moves God as much as a noble and sacrificial spirit. But now, in our time, this kind of nobility is rare, because self-love and self-interest have entered the picture. Seldom does someone say, "Let me give my turn, my place, to someone else, and it's alright if I am delayed." Few are those blessed souls who think of others. Even among the spiritual people, there is a contrary spirit, a spirit of indifference.

The good is good only when the one who does it sacrifices something from himself, some sleep, some rest and so on. That is why Christ said, *But she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had.*[1] When I am at ease and do some good, it does not have the same value. But when I am tired and someone asks me, let's say, for directions and I do it, then it has value. Or, when I have had plenty of sleep and stay up all night with someone

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1. Cf. Lk 21:4; Mk 12:44.

who needs help, this does not have great value. And if I'm fond of conversation, I may do this in order to enjoy the company and be entertained a little. Whereas, when I am tired and make a sacrifice to help someone, then I experience a heavenly joy. It is then that I am bombarded with the blessing of God!

When someone is too lazy not only to help others, but even to do something for himself, then he can get tired while resting. One who helps rests through tiring himself. One who has the spirit of sacrifice, will, for example, if he sees someone physically weak working and tiring himself, tell him, "sit down and rest", and do the work. The weak person will get physical rest, but the other will experience spiritual rest. Whatever one does he must do it with his heart, otherwise he is not transformed spiritually. Whatever is done with the heart does not tire us. The heart is like a machine that is charged; the more it works, the more it is charged. You see, the chain saw, when it finds a soft log, goes "vrrrrr..." and stops; but when it finds a hard log, it forces itself, gets overcharged and really works effectively. And, not only when we give, but also when we are about to receive something, let us not think of ourselves, but let us look to see what will be of some comfort to the other person. Let us not be greedy and insatiable, believing that we are entitled to take all we want, leaving nothing for others.

– Geronda, again it is the spirit of sacrifice that enters into the situation.

– But in the spiritual life the whole basis is there. Can you imagine what joy is experienced by the one who sacrifices himself? One cannot even express the joy he feels. Sublime joy emanates from sacrifice. Only when we sacrifice ourselves can we be related to Christ, for Christ is sacrifice. Man can live in Paradise from here and now, or he can live in hell. Whoever does good is overjoyed, for he is rewarded with divine consolation. Whoever does evil suffers.

My Repose Stems From the Repose of Others

– Geronda, if someone has not tasted the joy of sacrifice, how can he attain such a spirit of sacrifice?

– By putting himself in the other's place. When I was serving in the army, the machine-gun post was often filled with water; the batteries for the wireless needed to be changed – and it was very difficult, because the line was overloaded. I was drenched to my waist and my overcoat was dripping. Yet, I preferred to do the work myself so as not to trouble the others, and I was happy to do it. My commanding officer would tell me, "I am at ease and feel secure when you do the work, but I feel sorry for you. Let someone else go and do the work." But I would tell him, "No, I am happy to do it, sir." There was another wireless operator in our company, but during the manoeuvres, I didn't let him carry the batteries or the wireless, even though they were heavy, so that he wouldn't be in danger. He pleaded with me, "Why don't you let me carry them?" And I would tell him, "You have a wife and children. If you are killed, I will have to answer to God." So God protected both of us; He didn't allow either of us to get killed.

It is preferable for a sensitive person to die once out of love in order to protect his neighbour, rather than be neglectful or cowardly and then to be constantly tormented by his conscience for the rest of his life.

Once, during the guerrilla warfare manoeuvres, the guerrillas had cut us off outside one of the villages, and the soldiers were going to draw lots to see who would go into the village for supplies. "I'll go," I said. If some inexperienced or careless soldier had to go, he could have been killed and then my conscience would have troubled me. "It would be better," I thought, "for me to die than the other soldier, and then to have my conscience killing me for the rest of my life. How could I endure that? My conscience would tell me, 'You could have saved him; why didn't you save him?'" At the time, I was fasting and had not eaten ... but never mind that. Our commanding officer told me, "I, too, prefer that you go, for you are experienced, but you should eat something to have energy." I took my weapon and set off. The guerrillas mistook me for one of their men and allowed me to pass through. I went into the village and entered a two-storied house. An elderly woman who was there gave me supplies and I returned to my company safely.

The greatest joy I experienced in the winter, there in the snow. I remember one night waking up, while the others were still sleeping. The snow had covered the tents. I went, took the wireless, removed the snow from its holes and saw that it still worked. I ran to our commanding officer and told him. That night I saved twenty-six soldiers from freezing by digging them out of the snow with a shovel. I have done nothing for Christ. If only ten percent of what I did in the army had been done for Christ, now I would be doing miracles! This is why later as a monk I would say, "While in the army I went through so many hardships for my country, but now as a monk what am I doing?" In other words, compared to the hardships

I endured in the army, my life as a monk was like being a prince – regardless if I had or didn't have even a crust of bread to eat. Have you any idea what kind of fasting we did during the army manoeuvres? We ate granulated snow. The others ran about and found something to eat. But I could not move about with the wireless. Once we were without food for thirteen days. They had rationed to us one loaf of bread and half a salted herring. Sometimes the only thing we had to drink was the muddy water in the hoof prints of the animals. Most of the time, I had to quench my thirst not with clean rainwater, but with muddy water. Once I even drank some ... "orange juice"! Later as a monk, even the water that may not have been so pure seemed to me like a great blessing. At least it looked like water.

Once one afternoon, the ground line had been broken. It was December of 1948. The snow was deep. At four o'clock in the afternoon, the order was given to go to the village two hours away, to repair the line and return. In the meantime, there were only two more hours of daylight. The soldiers were dead tired and didn't have the energy to start. And how was one to find the broken line in so much snow!

– Didn't you know the way and where the line was?

– Well, I had an idea where the road was, but the night was fast approaching. In any case, they gave me a group of soldiers and we started out. At first we cleared the snow from the road in the camp and proceeded a little to set our commanding officer at ease. Then I said, "Let's move on now, for we must also return." I took the lead because the others were resisting. They were grumbling, "Greece never dies ... but we are dying." The same thing

over and over again. Again and again, I would sink into the snow, and they would lift me up. I carried a bayonet which I would thrust into the snow to create a grounding. I had to check constantly. I would get in the front. "Move on, animals don't pass this way to cut the line. Only in some depression in the ground where the line may be suspended over it, there is where we should check." Finally, we reached a village with terraces, but because the wind had made snow drifts there, we could not see anything. When we reached the terraces, I fell into the snowdrift and the others had a hard time getting me out. Gradually, going from one terrace to the next, don't even ask me how, we all descended to the village late at night. In some nearby depressions I found the broken line dangling in two places; we repaired it and were able to communicate with our commander. He told us, "Return to the camp." But how were we to return to the camp? Aside from it being night time, how were we to climb the terraces, from which we virtually had just rolled down. How were we to find our way at night? So I told him, "We made it downhill, but now it will be very difficult going uphill. Let us return tomorrow morning by going around the village." He insisted that we return that night. Fortunately, an adjutant heard the commander and pleaded with him to allow us to remain in the village that night, which we did. We received hospitality in a house and they gave us several *tserges*,[2] to sleep in. I was completely soaked by shovelling the snow to open the way in front, so they felt sorry for me and placed me in the middle so that I could be warm. During all that time, we had eaten just a piece of rooty. I cannot remember experiencing a greater joy in my life.

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[2] *Tserga* (pl. *Tserges*): a heavy and coarse woolen blanket, a velentza.

I had to give you these examples so that you understand what sacrifice means. I didn't tell you all these things so that you'd applaud me, but so that you understand where true joy comes from. In addition to the above, some people in the Signals Office would tell me lies, "My father is coming and I need to go and see him. Please take over my duties for a while." Another would say, "My sister is here" – and she wasn't even his sister. Still others would say something else, and I would constantly be doing some service for one or another of my fellow soldiers and sacrificing myself. Then I would also sweep and clean, because it was forbidden for others to enter the Signals Company. Not even an officer from another service was permitted to enter, for it was wartime. We could not even get someone to clean. So I would pick up the broom and clean up all the areas. It was there that I learned to sweep. I simply thought to myself, "This, a place of service, and in a way it is a sacred place; it cannot be untidy." I was not required to do the cleaning, nor did I know how. At home, I had never touched a broom, and, if I had, my sister would have taken it from me and given me a beating with it. The others called me "the cleaning woman" or "perpetual victim". But I never minded these things. And I never did anything to hear a "thank you". I really did it with my heart, because I felt it was necessary, and I enjoyed it.

– Geronda, did you have any negative thoughts? For example, did you think that fellow is just going out; he's not going to see his sister?

– No, I didn't have such thoughts. From the moment

someone said to me, "Please, can you take my place for a while," that was it; it was done. Sometimes someone would ask me for money and tell me it was for his children. He not only did not send the money to his children, but asked for more from his wife to spend on himself. You see? Nor did I do it to earn praise. I simply felt it as a need. Because I never took any leave, the others took advantage of this and left their work for me to do. I ended up doing all the company's work. The signals were piling up, and the lines were constantly busy. I would get worn out. Once I had a temperature of 39.5 C. and didn't tell anyone. Finally, I fainted from exhaustion and they took me away on a stretcher to a hospital. I heard them saying, "Come on Benedictos,[3] we are taking you with the stretcher to the garage for overhaul!" They left me there alone – who would pay any attention to me? Their concern was for the wounded –, but I felt joy, the joy which comes from sacrifice. For I found my repose in the repose of others.

The More We Forget Ourselves the More God Remembers Us

Whoever has faith in God and a sacrificial spirit does not consider himself. When someone does not cultivate the spirit of sacrifice, he thinks only of himself and wants everybody else to sacrifice themselves for him. But whoever thinks only of himself is isolated from others as well as from God – a double isolation – in which case he cannot receive divine Grace. He becomes a useless person. One can readily see that he who thinks constantly of himself, his difficulties and troubles, and so on, will not find even some human assistance when a need arises. Not having divine assistance is one thing, but not having even some human assistance is quite another. Then he will struggle one way or another to find some help. He will torment himself trying to find some help from men, but he will not find such help. On the contrary, someone who does not think of himself but thinks constantly of others, in the good sense, will be thought of constantly by God, and then others will also think of him. The more one forgets himself, the more God remembers him. Look at some soul in a Monastery sacrificing herself, offering herself, and so on. Do you think that this will not be noticed by others? Is it possible for others not to think of this soul offering herself entirely and not thinking of herself? Is it possible for God not to think of her? This is important! Here one can see the blessing of God, how God works.

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[3] Benedictos was the name of the preacher in that region, and the fellow soldiers of the Elder, when they wanted to tease him, called him Benedictos.

Someone is tested through the trials of life. It is there that you see if he has real love, a true spirit of sacrifice. And when we say that someone has the spirit of sacrifice, we mean that at the time of danger he does not consider himself but thinks of the others. You see that even the popular proverb affirms this, *A friend in need is a friend indeed.* God forbid, but if bombs were to fall now, it would reveal who is thinking of others and who is thinking of himself. But someone who is used to thinking only of himself will at a time of danger also think of himself, and God will not think of him. When even now someone does not think of himself but is thoughtful and considerate of others, he will do the same at a time of danger. It is

then that it becomes clear who are truly the people with a sacrificial spirit and who are the selfish ones.

If one does not start sacrificing something now, like giving up some desire or selfishness, how will he ever be able to sacrifice his life at a difficult time? If, even now, he thinks of the labour and tries to avoid working a little harder than the next person, how will he ever attain the state of risking his own life to save another's? If now he thinks only of himself even in small matters, how can he then think of others when his own life is in danger? Then it will be far more difficult. If difficult times come and a selfish person sees a neighbour, for example, sick with fever collapsing in the street, he will leave him there and go away saying, "I must go and lie down to rest lest, I, too, become sick."

During wartime, your own life is struggling with the life of the other. Bravery is running to save another's life. When there is no spirit of sacrifice, everyone looks to only save himself. And it is often seen that someone who during the war tries to hide is most often found by a hand grenade. He attempts to escape and he comes a cropper. For this reason, one must not try to escape, especially at the expense of others. I remember an incident during the Albanian war. A soldier had a stone slab to protect his head. In the meantime, he had to move over and he set the slab down. Immediately the soldier next to him took it, saying, "Here's my chance to take it for myself now." At that moment, a mortar fell on him and killed him. He saw the incoming fire and took the slab for himself without thinking of the other soldier who would return. He thought only of himself and justified his action. "Since the other soldier moved over a little, I can now take his slab for myself." Yes, he left, but it was his protective slab.

Another person tried throughout the duration of the war to save himself. He thought of no one but himself. The others helped, but he stayed at home. He sought until the very end, when things became very difficult, to avoid danger. Later, when the British had come, he went to the camp, presented himself to Napoleon Zervas[4] and, because he also had American citizenship, found an opportunity to leave for America. As soon as he arrived there he died! His poor wife used to say, "He tried to escape from God!" He died, while others who went to war survived.

Those Who Die Bravely Do Not Die

I remember that in the army we all had a common goal. I tried, but the spirit of sacrifice existed in the others as well, regardless of whether or not they believed in the afterlife. "Why should he be killed? He is a family man," they would say, and they would volunteer for a dangerous mission. The sacrifice they made had greater value than the sacrifice made by a believer. The faithful person believes in divine justice and divine recompense, whereas the others do not know their sacrifice will not be in vain and will have its recompense in the afterlife.

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[4] Napoleon Zervas (1891-1957): A Greek General and Politician. He was one of the most significant figures of the national resistance movement against the Germans and, later on, against the guerrillas.

During the Occupation, back then with Constantine Davakis,[5] the Italians had arrested young officers, put them in a boat and sank it. Later, they gathered the first people they found and tortured them to reveal who had weapons. What a great sacrifice made by worldly people! In Konitsa, near our home, where they have now built the Church of Saint Cosmas Aitolos,[6] there used to be a mosque. They were locked up in the mosque and severely beaten throughout the night with whips and wires and other instruments of torture which tore their skin. To muffle the cries of the prisoners, their captors sang or played music. This is where the saying came from: "To be beaten to music." They even hung them upside down until the blood started oozing from their mouths. But they did not speak throughout these tortures, for they thought, "If we talk and reveal who has weapons – for they knew who did have some weapons – they will beat all the others to get them to confess." This is why the first group said, "Let us die and prove to them that the others don't have any weapons." But there were some who for a few pounds of flour would say so and so has a couple of weapons.

People were dying of hunger and would readily betray others. A battalion made up of Italian soldiers who were all illegitimate children and had grown to be particularly cruel would then release all their anger. They'd take little children, place them naked on hot metal machines, step on them so they'd burn so that their parents might reveal where the weapons were hidden. "We have no weapons, we have no weapons!" the older people shouted, but the Italians continued to torture and burn the children. What I am trying to say is that these more or less worldly people were willing to die so the others would not be beaten or even killed. This way they saved many lives. That's how our Nation was upheld in those difficult times, by a handful of brave men!

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[5] Constantine Davakis (1897-1943): Infantry colonel and a Greek-Italian war hero. The Greek army's heroic encounter during the outbreak of the Italian attack in Epirus is owed to him.

[6] Saint Cosmas Aitolos (1714-1779). His feast is celebrated on August 24.

Those who die bravely do not die. Without heroism nothing can be done. And know that a believer is also brave. Look at poor Makriyannis,[7] what he suffered and at what period of time!

– Geronda, Yannis Makriyannis wrote once, "My eyes smoked."

– Yes, his eyes did smoke, and they looked like they had vapours coming out of them from all the intensity and agony he felt. He found himself in that situation, and, out of pain and love, he constantly sacrificed himself. He did not think of himself or consider his own interests. And he had no fear of being killed when he was struggling for his country. Yannis Makriyannis experienced spiritual conditions. If he were to become a monk, I believe that he would not have differed much from Saint Anthony. He used to do three thousand prostrations while his body still suffered from war injuries and wounds. During his devotions, his wounds would open, and his intestines would come out and he would push them back in. Three

of my prostrations equal one of his. He would wet the floor with his tears. If we were in his place, we would go to the hospital to be cared for by others. And these worldly people will be our judges!

He Who Does Not Consider Himself Receives Divine Power

– Geronda, was your life ever in danger during the war?

– Oh yes, not just once or twice. I think now how God helped and I'm profoundly moved. I didn't think of it then. Especially death, I didn't think about it at all. When you are determined to face death, you aren't afraid of anything. The determination for death is equal to a thousand guards. Death is security. In war, the sacred companies of dedicated soldiers have the skull as their symbol; it says that they are ready to die. Whoever doesn't think of himself but prefers the good of others and the general good, receives divine power. And you see, when someone acts with a sacrificial spirit, God protects him.

I remember once we set up a defensive post behind a huge boulder. I had dug a foxhole and was hiding in it. A fellow soldier came and asked me, "May I come in too?" Another soldier came and asked the same thing. I allowed them to come into my foxhole and I remained outside. At night when many bullets were being fired, one literally grazed my scalp. I was wearing only a hood, not the helmet. I shouted, "Guys, I've been hit!" I touched my head with my hand and looked, but there was no blood. I touched it again, nothing. The bullet had grazed my head and had only cut my hair toward the back, leaving a strip six centimetres wide without any hair!

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[7] Yannis Makriyannis (1797-1864): General in the Greek revolution of 1821 and a great fighter. Following the independence of the Greek State, he also fought for the granting of a constitution to the Greek people by Otto, the Monarch of Greece. He authored acclaimed memoirs, known as the *Memoirs of Makriyannis*.

You have not gone through difficult years or occupations; you have not seen wars or enemies, and so on – and I hope you never do – nor do you understand such things. But these years are like a pressure-cooker that is boiling and whistling. It takes endurance, bravery and manliness. If something should happen, be sure not to leave yourselves completely unprepared. Be prepared from now to be able to face any potential difficulty. What did Christ say? Didn't He say, *Be ye ready*?[8] Living in such difficult times as we do today gives us one more reason to be all the more prepared. It is not only sudden death that we may encounter; there are other dangers as well. Therefore, dispel the spirit of ease and comfort for ourselves. Let the sense of *philotimo* prevail. May you always have the spirit of sacrifice.

Now I see something that is about to happen, but is constantly postponed. There are many short postponements. Who is making these delays? Is God pushing? Let's give it one more month, two months! This is how the present situation is going.[9] But because we do not know what is waiting for us, it is best to cultivate as much as possible the virtue of love. This is the most important of all: to have true love among yourselves, sisterly love, not false love. Always, when there is true concern for each other, compassion and love, one can act correctly. Kindness and love are empowering. As far as possible, be discreet in your conversations and do not overly open

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[8] Mt 24:44; Lk 12:40.

[9] This was said in November of 1984.

up to others. One will say it to another and another to yet another, and then what will come of that? It is entirely possible from one foolish remark to cause a lot of harm, and then you'll be knocking your heads on the wall. You should have seen the secrecy observed in the army! Your first responsibility if captured was to destroy the secret signals code. You had to cut it into small pieces and swallow them. Once, when I was in danger of being captured, I swallowed them. Otherwise, if the guerrillas had taken them and had learned the army was in a particular place, needing food or supplies, they could then send a message to our headquarters, and the air force would be dispatched to drop food for them and bombs on our army. You see? The guerrillas could present themselves as the army. If you were captured and they knew you were the wireless operator, they would pull out your fingernails with pliers to make you tell them the secret signals code. And you were willing to endure that torture rather than to betray the secret code. Another soldier was burned under the armpits to deliver a particular secret letter. He did not give in and became paralysed from the torture. He did not confess and that is why he became a confessor. Some women transported secret communications hidden in saddles and were determined to die if necessary.

Death in wartime is very redeeming when someone sacrifices himself in order to protect others. Those who sacrifice their life from pure love in order to protect their fellow human being are imitating Christ Himself. They are the greatest heroes, because they are feared even by death itself, as out of love they defy death and gain immortality, taking the key of eternity right out from under the slab of the tomb and trip lightly toward eternal blessedness.

The Entire Life of a Monk Is a Sacrifice

The monk is helped naturally by his whole way of life to have love and sacrifice. He has set out to die for Christ. In other words, he set out for sacrifice. Having no obligations, the monk is obliged to cultivate the spirit of sacrifice. A layman does not set out to die for Christ. In addition, he has obligations; he must think of his family, his children, and for this he has extenuating circumstances, he can be justified. For example, during a war, one who has a family may try to avoid the danger, for the sake of his children. He may not think that, in doing so, someone else may die who also has children. In any case, there is here at least a concern for his family. He says, "My children must not be left on the street." He may not even believe in the other life and be only trying to save this life.

– In other words, Geronda, a monk must be constantly sacrificing himself.

– Look, didn't we say that the whole life of a monastic person is one big sacrifice? Otherwise we achieve nothing. If a monastic is making slow progress in this matter, then he is not a monastic. Then where is the spirituality? There is no spirituality when there is no sacrifice. All the spiritual disciplines which a monk does without sacrificing himself are nothing. On the Holy Mountain, such aspects of the spiritual life, for example prayer, fasting, vigils, and so forth, are called *koukouskiachtika* (scarecrow). In other words, a monk who performs these spiritual disciplines cannot dispel the demons; at best he may dispel the crows. When someone takes seriously the struggle that must be carried out in this life, there is a divine flame in him. If this divine flame is missing, then he is useless. It is this that gives him joy, courage, *philotimo*. This is what the Lord said, *I came to cast fire upon the earth.*[10] When this divine fire exists, then the chanting and the prayer we do for ourselves and for others will have results. This is especially true for a woman's heart which, when purified, has tremendous power. They also make great strides in prayer, becoming a radar for God. Whoever has no *philotimo*, no sacrifice, will have either worldly joy or worldly worries, but he cannot experience spiritual delight.

This is why I say that sacrifice must be developed, the sense of brotherhood. Each one of you must acquire a spiritual state, in order to be able to get through things alone at a difficult time. If one is not in this spiritual state, he may falter because of self-love. He may even deny or betray Christ. You must be prepared to die. Here there are laypersons in the world who sacrifice themselves and don't even believe in Paradise. We believe that nothing is lost and our sacrifice has meaning. When laypersons who are ignorant of all these things sacrifice themselves and put themselves in danger to protect others, can monastics neglect to cultivate the spirit of sacrifice? We start out to die for the love of Christ; we have no obligations and, well, if we have no sense of sacrifice, what are we doing then? Even the ants will laugh at us! Have you seen ants making fun of humans? They make fun of the lazy ones!

– Geronda, is it possible for me to be willing to serve others and not have pure motives?

– This can be recognized. When the motives are not pure, the soul does not find peace. In this case, you detect the problem and try to purify the motives. I was impressed by one of the souls that came these days. When she learns that someone is sick and suffering, she cannot sleep, and cries in compassion. And she lives in the world. She said this to someone and was advised, "It may be from temptation." Can this be from temptation? Only if it is done ostentatiously can one be fooled by temptation to live a false spiritual state.

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[10] Lk 12:49.

Take your own self out of your activities. When someone goes beyond himself, he goes beyond the earth. He moves in another atmosphere. As long as he remains in the self, he cannot become a heavenly person. There is no spiritual life without sacrifice. Once in a while, remember death. Since we are to die, let's not be so attentive to ourselves. I don't mean be careless and allow harm to come, but don't worship ease and comfort. Nor am I saying throw yourself into danger, but at least have some heroism, you know? Look at the heroes and the bravery with which they faced death in battle.

I was told by a monk who was with Georgios Kondylis[11] – Kondylis was a patriot, a hero. During the war in Asia Minor, the Greeks had disembarked near Constantinople. Kondylis, still in his ship, saw the City from a distance and, deeply moved, shouted with excitement, "Come on men, we are going to die sooner or later; why not today? Let's die bravely! Let's die as heroes for our

country!" He was eager to approach the landing dock. In his excitement, he didn't notice that the ship had not yet touched the dock when he jumped over the side, and he fell into the sea! That's how excited he was. He was unable to swim, so his men jumped in and got him out.

– Geronda, you told us to try to keep our self out of our activities. How is this done?

– You like to have everything ready-made. What does it mean to take my self out? When do I take my self out? How are we to take our self out of our love? How are we to brighten up our love? The less I consider myself, the more I remove my self. And when we cut our will, our weakness, our ease and comfort, then we take our self out, too. And a lot of things vanish from our self through obedience and silence. And when our love is not selfish and self-involved, again, we take our self out, but our love must also be sacrificial. Do you understand this? Let us suppose, for example, that one of the nuns wants to go and see the Abbess and sees another Sister who also wants to go. If she immediately relinquishes her turn to the other, while knowing that the other does not have serious matters to discuss, then she is truly obedient, sacrificial, and so on. And when with her whole heart she gives up her turn and does not speak with the Abbess, well, then, it will be Christ Himself Who will speak with her. But she must take this to be a necessity, her heart must be in it, and she must not do it merely because the holy Fathers say so. This way she can receive a double portion of the Grace of God. In this case, one nun will be helped spiritually in human terms, while the other will be helped in divine terms, directly by Christ.

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[11] Georgios Kondylis (1878-1936): Military leader and politician. At the age of 18 he voluntarily enlisted in the army where he was soon distinguished during his participation in the Revolution of Crete (1896), the Greco-Turkish War (1897), as well as in the Macedonian Struggle (1904-1908). He carried out a leading role in the political developments of Greece and served as Prime Minister (1926) and Regent (1935).

We see lay people who demonstrate a degree of sacrifice that even monastics don't have. In the world – and I'm impressed by this – even though people may not believe, may have their weaknesses, their passions, God provides for them to have a gentle and kind heart. They see someone who is in need, even a total stranger, and they go and help him. Many who do not even believe in Paradise, if they see danger, they run to prevent some evil from happening, they will endanger themselves to save others, to save property, and so on.

Many years ago, a worker in a factory was in danger of getting caught in the gears of a large machine and, while there were many men around, it was actually a woman who ran to save him. The men who were supposed to be brave stood there watching... Finally, the woman saved the man, but her own skirts got caught in the machine and she was killed. A martyr indeed!

Such people don't take their own self into consideration; they throw the self out. And when the self is thrown out, that's when Christ is thrown in!

CHAPTER THREE

Bravery Is Born of Trust in God

Bravery Is Not Barbarity

Heroic deeds are done by the brave; the big-hearted – not the big-framed – who are determined to sacrifice themselves. And in wartime, those who are real heroes also have a goodness about them and do not kill unnecessarily. Bravery has no room for barbarity. They may shoot all around the enemy in such a way as to force him to surrender. The good man prefers to be killed than to kill. And when someone has such intentions, he receives divine strength. Evil men are cowards, unmanly, bullies; they fear both themselves and others; this is why they will be constantly shooting more out of fear than purpose.

During the guerilla warfare when I served with the Army, we had gone to a village. They told us, "There are none of the guerrillas here; they've all gone away. Only one crazy woman is left." One of our men saw her in the distance and immediately fired one or two rounds with his weapon! The poor woman shouted, "What have I done to you?" and then fell down.

– Did he do this out of fear?

–Yes, out of fear. Such a person looks for the easy solution for himself. In order to be certain he says, "It's better to get rid of the enemy." The less cowardly person is also the less evil. He will try to disable the enemy, he will try, let's say, to break his arm or his leg, not kill him.

Manliness, bravery is one thing, but malice, criminality, is another. It is not manly to take the enemy, the prisoners, and slaughter them. Manliness is taking the enemy prisoner, breaking his weapons and then letting him go. That is what my father did. Whenever he caught any Tsetes[1] who raided the town of Pharasa, he took their weapons and broke them, telling the raiders, "You're women; not men." Then he would let them go. Once he dressed up as a Turkish woman and went into their camp and asked for their captain. Previously he had made plans with his own men to attack when the signal was given. When the Tsetes took my father to their captain, he said, "Send your men away so we can be alone." When they were alone, he grabbed the captain's weapon, broke it and told him, "Now you're the woman and I am Eznepides."[2] Then he gave the signal, and his brave men came upon the Tsetes and chased them from the town.

To get ahead one must have a crazy streak, in the good sense of the term. Depending on how you use this crazy streak, you can become either a saint or a hero. But if you are not helped and are led astray, you can also become a criminal. One who doesn't have a crazy streak cannot become either a saint or a hero. That is why we need to get our inner engine started, our heart to work, our bravery. Our heart must become foolhardy.

I know many military men who have been retired and are full of chagrin. Some of them are looking for a war to begin so they can be active again. Others, tremble at the thought of being called up for military duty, while others feign madness to avoid it. Many veterans tell me they would like to go up to Bosnia to fight. They have not used their bravery in the spiritual life and, for this reason, when they hear of war, they are ready to go and fight. These people who have so much energy and will, if they had only come to know the spiritual life, can you imagine what asceticism, what spiritual struggles they would have been able to undertake? They would have become saints.

There Was Such Bravery in the Past

– Geronda, once you told us something about your grandmother...

– My grandmother was a very brave woman. She always carried a scimitar with her for security. You see, she was a widow with two children, how could she make ends meet with the Turks. Those were difficult years... Everyone was afraid of her. She was a true *pallikari*! Once a thief went to steal from the vineyard near the cemetery. To frighten the people, the thief wore a white shirt which covered his entire body. He entered the cemetery and wandered around the graves. Right then my grandmother happened to pass by the cemetery. As soon as he saw her, the thief laid down and pretended to be dead, hoping to frighten her by taking him to be some vampire. But she came up

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[1] Turkish irregulars.

[2] The family name of the Elder.

to him and told him, "If you were a good man the earth would have consumed your body!" She then turned the scimitar on its blunt side and started beating the thief. She beat him very severely. She didn't even know who he was. Later in town she heard about someone who had been somehow severely beaten and that's how she found out who he was.

Brave people are rare in our times. People today are lukewarm. That's why if, God forbid, a war breaks out, some will die out of fear, others will fall on the street from some minor hardship because they are so used to comforts. In the past, people were so brave! In the Monastery of the Flavians in Asia Minor, the Turks had captured a man and slaughtered him. Then they told his wife, "Either deny Christ or we will kill your children, too." And she replied, "My husband is now with Christ, and my children I entrust to Christ, and I will not renounce Christ." What bravery! If Christ is not in us, how can there be such bravery? Today, people without Christ are building their homes on rubble.

In those years, the mothers and the children were brave and courageous souls. In Konitsa, I remember a pregnant woman who would walk alone an hour and a half away to hoe the cornfield. There she gave birth to her child, wrapped it in her apron and returned home. As she passed by our home, she told us, "I now have a baby!" This happened during the difficult years of the Occupation. Now there are women who, out of fear, spend six or seven months lying down in order to give birth to a child. Of course, it is different for those women who have to do this for reasons of health.

Natural Fear Serves as a Brake

– Geronda, I am very afraid and think of what am I going to do in some difficult situation. Where does this fear come from?

– Maybe someone suffered something as a child and is now afraid because of that. Many times the fear may be natural, but it can also stem from a lack of faith, from the lack of trust in God. But fear can also be a brake because it helps man to turn to God. Man is afraid and looks to find something to hold on to and is then forced to hold on to God. You see, in tropical jungles inhabited by wild native people there are also wild animals, large beasts, boas, and so forth, in order to force the people to seek help from God, to turn to God, and to find their path. Otherwise, what would it take to constrain these people? All that God has made serves some purpose.

– Those who do not know the true God, and who out of fear seek help, do they receive help?

– Look, they turn their head upward and that too is something. Even for young children fear is a brake. Some children, if they are not threatened a little, don't listen to anyone, neither father nor mother. When I was a small child, they told me about the *bouboulos* (the scary being who is supposed to frighten children into obedience). It is natural for a young child to be afraid. But as the child grows up, the mind matures and the fear subsides. Natural fear is helpful during our childhood years. When a person grows up and still fears the most insignificant things, then he is to be pitied. Spiritual people come to my *Kalyvi* and tell me, "Someone next door to us has died and since then we are terribly afraid all the time." They ask me to pray for their fear to go away. My response to them is this, "Here we try to cultivate a constant memory of death, for our spiritual edification, and you want to dispel this fear of death because someone has died next door to you!"

There is a little extra natural fear among women. Few are the women who are not afraid. But these same women may also create problems in the family by not subordinating themselves. By the same token, a man who is not by nature timid and who has a certain air of bravery may become impudent. And there are some women who are extremely afraid. When a woman has a natural fear, and she struggles with it to acquire courage, this is a significant achievement. Woman, who by nature has the spirit of sacrifice, also has much self-renunciation, which a man may not have, in spite of his natural manliness.

He Who Is Not Afraid of Death Is Feared by Death Itself

– Geronda, how does fear go away?

– With bravery. The more we fear, the more we become susceptible to temptation. He who is afraid needs to try to dispel his fears. When I was a small boy, I was afraid to pass by the cemetery. For this reason, I slept three nights in the cemetery and the fear went away. I made the sign of the cross and entered – without lighting a flashlight, to avoid alarming anyone at night. If one does not struggle to be strong and mature, and if one does not acquire authentic love, he will find himself in difficult situations and become utterly lamentable.

– In other words Geronda, can someone train himself so as to not be afraid?

– He should be glad to die so others may not die. If he can put himself in this position, he will never be afraid of anything. A spirit of bravery is born from an abundance of goodness, love, and self-sacrifice. But today people do not want to hear about death. I have learned that funeral directors no longer use the term "Office for Funerals" but "Office of Services", so as to avoid any reference to death. But if people do not think about death, they are living outside reality. Those who fear death and love the vain life of this world also fear germs and are constantly overcome by a timidity that always grips them in a state of spiritual death. Daring people are never afraid of death, and that is why they struggle with *philotimo* and self-renunciation. Because they place death before them on a daily basis, they prepare themselves more spiritually and they undertake a more daring discipline. This is how they overcome the vanity of the world, and experience while alive the joy of eternal Paradise. Even in war, whoever struggles for his ideals, his faith and his country, should make the sign of the cross and not be afraid. God provides and helps. If he makes the sign of the cross and puts his life in God's hands, He will then judge if he should live or die.

– Is it possible for someone to not be afraid out of thoughtlessness?

– This is much worse, for in some critical danger he can suffer such a jolting that will completely undo him once and for all. Whereas, someone who is a little afraid will be careful, and will not expose himself thoughtlessly to dangers. He may be forceful and daring, but he must also trust in God and not in himself.

Courage Is of Great Merit

In a time of disaster more harm is done from the panic which is created. In a time of danger the most important thing is to keep calm and collected. We see sometimes how the hen challenges the eagle and goes after him! And the cat attacks the dog to save her kittens! It raises its tail straight up like a cypress tree and starts to hiss... A cat is ready to risk everything, while we humans are timid and scared!

Do not panic. Women especially panic easily. During the Occupation, I remember we had to go to a place two hours away from Konitsa. The children were walking ahead, and found some helmets and military clothing of Greek soldiers, put them on and went to the Chapel of Saint Constantine the Great. I was there too, I had gone to worship. I was seventeen years old. As soon as the mothers saw them from afar they began shouting, "The Italians are coming!" And they turned to go away. They did not stop to look and see what was really happening. The children after all were wearing Greek helmets. Assuming they were Italians, the mothers fled in fear of their own children!

Courage is of great merit. If you tell a healthy person who lacks courage, "You look pale; what is the matter with you?" he will run to the doctor, when in fact he may be pale simply because he didn't get a good night's sleep, or his tooth was aching, and so forth. A Greek will either lead the way or panic. Cowards are useless. In wartime such people are not wanted at all; they cannot be trusted. They will not be included in an attack on the front lines so they don't create problems. A cowardly soldier, not

knowing the strategic plan, can create enough panic to make an entire division go to pieces. Fear magnifies the imagination and he can easily begin shouting, "Look they're coming! They're here! They're killing us! Run! Where can we go! They have so many troops!" He can do a lot of damage, because others are readily influenced by such cries. On the other hand, one who is bold and brave will see the enemy and say, "They're ants, not men, come on men!" And the others charge forward with boldness. This is why they say in the army that it is better to have five bold men facing a situation with composure, than twenty cowards.

– Geronda, sometimes during a difficult situation involving a group of people, it is not so much the external dangers as the dangers from within.

– Yes, that's true. The Turks would not have been able to take the fortified Souli, if it had not been betrayed by Pelios Goussis, who was from Souli. He led the enemy up a secret path. You see, five villages were united in harmony, and could stand up to the army of Ali Pasha, who had the power to go against the Sultan.[3] Souli was close to the region controlled by Ali Pasha, but still they were able to deal with him effectively. The women of Souli were especially united among themselves and demonstrated great bravery! They, too, took up arms to defend themselves!

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[3] Sultan in Turkish means leader. The title given to the leaders of the Ottoman Empire and later to the leaders of other Muslim countries.

Discipline

– Geronda, when somewhere there is usually a lack of discipline, is it possible to have discipline in a critical situation?

– When there is a fire, for example, people don't just do whatever comes into their heads. Everyone on the team awaits directions from the leader. The one person in charge looks over the situation and determines what needs to be done. Otherwise, a panic could develop, and instead of putting out the fire, they could intensify it.

Once I was returning to the Holy Mountain. When we got to the point between the Monasteries of Vatopedi and Pantokratoros, a north-east wind began to blow and the sea began to swell. The captain turned the boat into the wind and sailed against the waves, because otherwise we would have sunk. A timid man from Ierissos, who knew nothing about boats or the sea – he worked with mules – started shouting to the captain, "What are you doing, you'll drown us! Don't you see? He's taking us to Kavala!" With that, the others got up and turned on the captain. But the poor captain insisted, "Let me be, I know what I am doing." Fortunately, one of the passengers was a seaman and was able to calm them down by saying, "Leave the captain alone; he knows what he's doing. He's cutting into the waves this way and saving us from sinking." If he were not there, the boat might have sunk because the others were not letting the captain do his job the way he knew best.

You see, only one man was afraid but he created such a panic among the others on the boat that they could have sunk it. But then again, for such circumstances, there is always a second mechanic to take the helm if the first is in some way incapacitated.

Greeks are not easily disciplined. Roman Catholics rely on the infallibility of their Pope. We rely on our own thinking and imagine that we all have this infallibility! Why is it said that the Turks have good policy? Because few are the Turks with brains, while the majority of them are ignorant. Consequently, the capable few become leaders, and the others naturally follow and obey them. The Greeks, because virtually all of them are very intelligent, all want to govern, to give orders, and can be subdued only with great difficulty. The Italians used to say of us, "Out of ten Greeks, the five want to be in charge!"

Let us assume that we want to go somewhere. One person knows a shortcut, another knows a way round the other side of the mountain, and still another knows yet another best way to go. Each one starts insisting, "This is the way we must go." "No," says the other, "this is the better way to go." Finally, hours and days may pass without them getting started. They'll stay in the same place until one of them can give the order and the others follow. But if one can give the order and say, "This is the way we will go," even if it is the longer way, at least they will eventually get to their destination. Of course, if the one giving the order also knows the shorter way, this would be better. In any case, even if they take the longer road by obeying the command, they will still arrive.

God Sees the Good Intention and Helps

– If the times demand something extra, something more than the usual, and you don't have a developed spiritual state but only a good intention, will you still be able to stand the strain?

– Of course you will. God sees the good intention and helps. Then again, quite often, during difficult times, people who do not seem to have any courage will demonstrate great bravery. I remember in the army a lieutenant who had never given a sign of sacrifice or bravery.

Once, when we were in danger of been captured by the guerrillas, he had taken position by a country Chapel and with one automatic weapon was able to pin them down while we retreated to safety. He stood his ground, and fired up and down, left and right, and did not allow them to pass. Finally, he left his post so we wouldn't see what he had done. Later, he never even boasted, "I delayed them so you could escape." We all said, "One automatic weapon saved us," and because we were saying it, he said it too. In the end, however, we realized who had been missing from the group at the critical time and understood who the hero who saved us was. If he had been captured, the enemy would have taken it out on him and tortured him most severely. A man of the world, and yet he made such a sacrifice! He sacrificed himself because he placed himself in greater danger than all of us.

Do you sacrifice yourselves like this? He had neither read the writings of the Fathers, nor did he know much about spiritual things. I knew him; he had a simplicity about him, a sense of honour. And there were others who would find a dead guerrilla, cut off his head, and parade around town with it to show how brave they were. That's why it's not enough to simply be brave, one must also have the spirit of sacrifice so that bravery can have an impact.

Dangers Must Be Faced Spiritually

Readiness and bravery are needed during critical times. During the Occupation, the Italians would take four or five animals, come to our field and load them with melons. Once I told them, "We're keeping these melons for seed, take those over there." The Italian lifted up his whip and said, "Do you see this?" I took hold of the whip, looked at it and said, "Bene!" That is, it's a good whip, as if he had shown me his whip to see if I liked it. In that instant his anger broke, he laughed and went away.

I remember another incident during the guerrilla warfare. Two soldiers had gone to the fields, and asked the owner to let them eat some melons or a few tomatoes. They left their guns to one side and proceeded. As the owner saw them from a distance, he picked up his own gun to fire at them. In an instant, one of the soldiers picked a red tomato and shouted to the owner, "Put the gun down or I'll send this grenade flying right at you!" The owner put the gun down and went away.

– What quick-witted preparedness and bravery!

– Another soldier had hung his overcoat on a wild pear tree at a distance. Shortly after that, an armed guerrilla came down from the mountain and could have captured the soldier. Turning to his overcoat, he shouted, "Captain, what shall I do with this one?" And then, as if receiving a signal from the "captain", the soldier told the guerrilla, "Bring your weapon here!" He then grabbed the gun and disarmed him.

– Geronda, was the overcoat the "captain"?

– Yes, he was the overcoat. You see, he was alone, with only his overcoat and he succeeded in disarming the guerrilla fighter. Using this technique, he was able to gather many weapons from the guerrilla fighters. It takes bravery!

I also remember a Russian monk on the Holy Mountain when thieves went to rob him. The moment the thieves were climbing the wall, he stood on the wall and shouted down to the thieves, "Do you want to have it with the six-shooter or the twelve-shooter!" The thieves ran off and never even looked back. Another monk, when thieves went to his cell to rob him, picked up a small frying pan and pretended to be making a telephone call, "Yes, yes, thieves are here at my cell..." The thieves, assuming he had called the police, went away.

Another time, again, a huge man had taken a shepherd by the neck and was trying to choke him. As the poor shepherd's eyes were stretched out in fear, his assailant asked, "Why are you looking at me with such wild eyes?" And the shepherd told him, "I'm looking to see which mountain peak I am going to throw you at." The assailant was frightened and left! That is why I say that we mustn't lose our cool at critical times. We must stay calm and let our brain think. Because, if the brain doesn't think, one simple foolish move can become an act of betrayal. No matter what is happening, we must pray, think and act. The best way is to try to face a difficult situation by spiritual means. But today, unfortunately, we lack both types of bravery, both the spiritual and the natural. Spiritual bravery is born out of sanctity and a boldness before God, that enables us to overcome a difficulty by spiritual means. Natural bravery helps us maintain our composure and avoid showing cowardice in time of danger. One must have much sanctity to prevent a great

evil, otherwise where can he possibly find support? If even one soul in the monastery has spiritual bravery, he can stop anyone with evil intentions in his tracks – with one leg inside the wall and the other outside.[4] The enemy will be struck on the head with spiritual weapons, with the *komboschoini*, with the Jesus Prayer, and not with a pistol. He will pray a little, and the other will remain motionless outside! He will remain there as a guard! A soul in a spiritual state can hold evil at bay, help people and keep the monastery safe. The Myrrh-bearing women didn't worry about anything, because they were in a spiritual state and placed their trust in Christ. If they had not been in a spiritual state, what would they have trusted in to do what they did?

In the spiritual life even the most cowardly person can acquire great bravery, if he only places his trust in Christ, in divine help. Such a person can go to the front line and fight in a war and win. Whereas those poor people who want to harm others, even if they are brave, will be afraid because they are aware of their guilt and can only rely on their barbarism. The man of God has divine powers, and righteousness is on his side. You can see a little puppy bark at a wolf and the wolf goes away because it feels guilty. God has so planned things that even a wolf can be afraid of a little puppy, because it, too, has rights in the home of its master. Now, how much more afraid will be someone who seeks to harm a person who holds Christ in his soul! For this reason, let us only fear God, not men, no matter how evil they may be. Fear of God transforms even the most cowardly person into a brave hero. The more we are united with God, the less we are afraid of anything.

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[4] See Elder Paisios of Mount Athos, *Saint Arsenios the Cappadocian*, Souroti, Thessaloniki 2007, p. 117.

God will help us in our difficulties. But for God to provide divine power, man must offer whatever little he has and can give.

CHAPTER FOUR

For the Faithful, Martyrdom Is a Festival

Some Must Fall to Save the Situation

Difficult years!... We will go through a difficult jolting. Do you know what it means to be jolted? If you are not somewhat spiritual, you will not be able to endure. God forbid, but we will even reach the point of denying our faith. Seek to be united in fellowship, live spiritually, be anchored to Christ. If you are anchored to Christ, you will fear neither demons nor torments. People in the world have many pressures and fears from all sides. But when one is close to Christ, what is there to fear? Do you remember Saint Kyrikos?[1] He was only three years old and, when the tyrant attempted to instruct him, he gave him a kick. Read the lives of the Saints. These texts (*Synaxaria*) are very helpful because they connect us to the Saints and ignite in us devotion and a desire for sacrifice.

This life is not meant to be one of ease and comfort. We're going to die anyway, so we might as well die properly. Since we're not doing anything else, may God grant us a martyrdom – wouldn't that be good? One day a *bourdounaris*[2] came to my *Kalyvi* in tears and told me, "Don't stay alone tonight. They're planning to kill you." "Who?" I asked. "There's five or six of them," he said. He was accompanying five or six atheists. Who knows what plans they had for the Holy Mountain. They took him for a fool and spoke openly in front of him. As soon as he heard it, he came to tell me.

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[1] His memory is celebrated on July 15.

That night, as I was going to bed, I heard a slight rattle, like a little bell on a dog. I looked through the window and saw three young men. "Open the door, old man," they shouted. But I answered, "What are young men like you doing wandering around at night? Don't you have any brains? You'll look suspicious! Some others were taken to jail. I have no appetite for conversation at this time of night." "Should we come tomorrow?" they asked. "Come tomorrow any time you want, and if I can I will see you," I reassured them. After I sent them away, I noticed that the light of their flashlight was not moving. They had stopped a little further up the hill. I got up, got dressed, put on my monastic Habit and waited for them, feeling all the while an inner peacefulness. The next day three groups of three men came to visit, but none of them were the three of the night before. Of course, they know that they won't find money on me, because I don't have any. They come and argue with me only about spiritual matters.

Another time, a very large man who had a body like a gorilla came to my *Kalyvi* and sat down quietly to one side. I was saying to a group of people, "You're only good for parades, not battles. Christ sacrificed Himself. We have Orthodox Christianity, with martyred Saints who are still helping us. If they had not died for the faith, who knows what we would be now." All of this talk seemed to have enraged him. People came and went, but he stayed off to the side. He seemed very intent. There was a coldness. Finally, the last of the people left. So I told him, "It's dark now, where will you go?" "I'm not concerned about that," he said. "But it concerns me – off you go," I retorted. Then he lunged at me and grabbed me by the throat. "You and your gods!" he said. When I heard him saying "your gods", I felt as if he was cursing God. What, am I a pagan to him? So I told him boldly, "What gods, you godless man? I worship the Triune God. Go, get out of here!" And with that, I gave him a push and he fell to the ground and rolled up. How he got out through the gate I don't know. After this, I thought to myself, "If I were to be hanged upside down to be tortured, this would at least help put the hernia[3] back in its place!" That fellow had stayed to the end with evil intentions, since he grabbed my throat and tried to choke me to death.

Whoever Is Determined to Die Fears Nothing

Today, for one to be able to face the difficulties he encounters, he must have Christ in his heart, from Whom he will receive divine consolation in order to have the sense of self-sacrifice. Otherwise, what is going to happen at a difficult moment? I read somewhere that Abdul Pasha[4] had taken five hundred young men from the Holy Mountain. Some of them were novices and some had gone there to hide. It seems that back then during the Greek Revolution, people took refuge on the Holy Mountain, because the Turks rounded up young boys to turn them into Janissaries. Of the young men Abdul Pasha gathered, those who did not deny Christ he would hang from the Tower at Ouranoupolis. Of those he gathered on the Holy Mountain only five were martyred, while the others denied Christ and became Janissaries. It takes bravery; it is not a trifling matter. If one has wretchedness and selfishness in his heart, he cannot have divine power, and then, how can he to face such a situation?

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[2] From the Latin word burdo-onis (a young mule) meaning the stable keeper or more specifically the guardian of the mules.

[3] The incident occurred in 1987 when the Elder was suffering from a hernia.

I was impressed by what one of the bishops of the Patriarchate said to me. I had previously noted, "What are we coming to? On the one hand, we have Ecumenism, on the other hand we have Zionism, and now satanism! Soon we'll be bowing to the devil with his two horns instead of to the two-headed eagle." Then he told me, "Today it is rare to find a bishop like the Bishop of Caesarea Paisios II."[5] What did Paisios II do? Well, he used to go to the Sultan to petition about his affairs while wearing a sturdy piece of rope around his waist, as he was determined and ready to be hanged by the Turks. It was as if he was suggesting to the Sultan, "Don't bother to look for a rope and delay; if you're going to hang me, here, I have the rope ready!" For the difficult issues of the Church he was the one sent to the Sultan. Many times he saved the Patriarchate from dangerous situations. In his old age, he would be taken to Constantinople on horseback in a large basket, with a counter weight on the opposite side of the horse.

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[4] Mehmet Emin Abdoulah Pasha was the governor of Thessaloniki during the years 1821-1823.

[5] Metropolitan of Caesarea born in Pharasa of Cappadocia in 1777. He studied at the Flavianon Theological School of Saint John the Prophet and Forerunner and later in Constantinople, where he was ordained deacon and priest. Ordained Metropolitan of Caesarea in 1832 he struggled boldly to save Hellenism in his eparchy.

Once the Turks had issued an order calling on Greeks to serve in the Turkish Army. Christians had a hard time serving together with Turks, because they could not carry out their religious duties. In the meantime, the Russians had asked the Turks not to prevent the Greeks from observing their religious duties. The Patriarch called upon Paisios and sent him to the Sultan. He then appeared before the Sultan again wearing the rope around his waist. The Sultan told him the Greeks must be conscripted to serve the country. Then Paisios told him, "Yes, I, too, agree that the Greeks should be conscripted to serve; after all, these lands belonged to them from long ago. But because we have a different religion, they must be placed in a separate army with their own officers, so they can observe their religious duties. You know that they cannot say their prayers together with your people; to have you observing Ramadan[6] and we the Epiphany!" The Sultan began to think to himself, "The Christians armed? This is dangerous." Then he answered, "No, no, it is better if the Greeks are not conscripted."

On another occasion, the Armenians had asked the Sultan to grant to them the Baloukli and were successful in getting his approval. Later, Paisios went to the Sultan to discuss this matter. The Sultan noted, "The Baloukli once belonged to the ancestors of the Armenians and they should have it." Then Paisios agreed with him, "Yes, they should have it, because, when we know that an area once belonged to our ancestors, we should take it. Give me a document to sign with you about the Baloukli, for I have come as a representative of the Patriarchate." He signed too. Then he took out a Constantinian florin[7] and said, "The Armenians should have Baloukli, but then we should have Haghia Sophia, for it is ours; it belongs to our ancestors, and you must give it to us!" And he showed the Constantinian florin. Paisios was accompanied by a Russian officer, who had arrived in the City by ship, to serve as a witness. At that moment, the Sultan found himself in a dilemma and rescinded his decision about the Baloukli. "No, no, the Baloukli is yours," the Sultan relented. The Sultan had to either rescind his decision about the Baloukli or else grant Haghia Sophia to the Greeks.

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[6] The ninth month of the Islamic calendar year, during which the faithful Muslims observe a strict fast (total abstinence of food, drink, smoking, and so on) from morning to night every day. The restrictions do not apply during the period from sunset to sunrise.

You see how Paisios was so effective in turning them around? And he was able to do this because he was fully prepared to die. If one has not made the decision about death and is not prepared to die, nothing can be achieved. It all starts from there.

Denial of the Faith Was Redeemed by Martyrdom

Today most people would prefer that others get the snake out of its hole. Fine, but if they are unwilling to

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[7] A gold coin depicting Saints Constantine and Helen worn as an ornament or as a phylakton.

get it out, at least they could give a warning, "Be careful, there may be a snake in that hole." This way one can approach an issue with some degree of caution and preparedness. But even this is not done. If we had lived in the times of the Martyrs, given the rationality we have, we would probably say, "I only deny God externally, not internally; this way I'll have my position and be able to help some poor soul." Back then, even if only incense was thrown into the fire of idol worshippers, the Church would excommunicate them, making them penitents in tears.[8] Those who had denied Christ could find redemption through martyrdom. Or, during the Iconoclastic Controversy, people were forced to burn or destroy the Icons, and they preferred martyrdom rather than desecrate the Icons. Whereas today, if we were told to throw away an Icon, we would just say, "Let me throw this one away; it's Renaissance art. I'll have a Byzantine Icon made later."

– Geronda, how can the Church accept the Crypto-Christians? Didn't they deny Christ?

– Wherever there are real Crypto-Christians, these have not become renegades. Out of the twenty-seven villages belonging to the eparchy of Pharasa in Cappadocia, when the Turks burned them, some of the people left and went faraway. There the local people did not know that they were Christians; they took them to be Muslims. At no time were they asked, "Are you a Christian?" so they could answer, "Yes, I am a Christian," or "No, I am a Muslim." These are the Crypto-Christians. But from the moment they take one of these people and tell him, "We have heard that you are a Christian," he will answer, "Yes, I am a Christian." He will not say I am a Muslim. Even in the early Christian centuries, there were Christians who were baptized secretly, and others had the impression that they were not Christians. But whenever it was necessary, they would make their confession openly. Saint Sebastian, for example, was a general. He had been baptized a Christian and people thought he was a pagan, when he was a Christian. Secretly he helped the Christians in many ways. However, when it became known that he was a Christian, he confessed his faith and became a martyr.

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[8] These penitents remained in the outer narthex of the Church appealing to the faithful who were entering the Church to pray for them to the Lord to find redemption (See *Pedalion*, canon 13).

In one of the Turkish villages, there were many Crypto-Christians and the president was a priest. Papa George was his name, Hasan is what they called him. Once he was informed that there were some Christians hiding in a certain catacomb. "I will go and check it out," he said, "Don't you worry." He took his people, and went and found all the Christians gathered there. He proceeded to the Royal Doors, put on the stole hanging there and began to say Vespers for them! Later he told them to take certain measures to protect themselves. Back in town he told the others, "It was nothing, only rumours." These people are not renegades. But from the moment someone is suspected and they tell him, "You must be a Christian, for I saw you making the sign of the cross," and he says, "No, I am a Muslim," then he denies his faith.

Martyrdom and Humility

One who is made worthy of martyrdom must have great humility and love Christ very much. If he goes to martyrdom with pride, Grace will abandon him. Do you remember Saprikios[9] who was about to be martyred and yet denied Christ at the very end? "Why did you bring me here?" he said to the executioners. "But aren't you a Christian?" they asked him. "No," he answered. And he was a priest! It seems to me that perhaps he went to his martyrdom with a sense of pride at first and not with humility. He was not going to martyrdom for his faith, for his love of Christ, and for this reason Grace abandoned him. For when one acts out of pride and egoism, he cannot receive the Grace of God, and, at a critical moment, he will deny Christ.

– Geronda, we often say that God will give us strength during difficult times.

– God will give strength to a humble person who has a pure heart, who has good intentions. If God sees a truly good will and humility, He will give great strength. In other words, it will depend upon the will of the person for God to give strength.

– Geronda, you said that one must have humility and good will. Is it possible to have pride and good will?

– When we say humility, we mean that one should have humility at least as far as martyrdom is concerned. One may be proud, but then he must humble himself and say, "My God, I am proud, but give me a little strength now to be able to witness to Your love and redeem my sins." In this case, when he approaches martyrdom with repentance and humility, then God gives much Grace. The point is not to go proudly, with the thought that he will become a martyr, that a *synaxarion* and a service will be written for him, and an icon will be painted of him with a halo.

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[9] See St Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain, *Synaxaristes of the Twelve Months of the Year*, ed. Orthodox Kypseli, Thessaloniki 1982, vol. 3, p. 239-241.

Someone told me, "Father, pray for me to reach the fifth heaven." I asked him, "While Saint Paul only reached to the third Heaven,[10] you are asking to reach the fifth?" "Why not? Doesn't he say that we should strive for the best?[11]" What impudence! In any case, if someone should seek martyrdom only to have glory in Paradise, it is better not to even think of martyrdom. A true and proper Christian, if he knew that even in Paradise he would again have suffering, a martyrdom, still he would long to go there. We must not imagine that if we suffer something here on earth, we will be better there in Heaven. We mustn't add things up like a shopkeeper. We want Christ. Let there be martyrdom, let there by martyrdom every day, let them beat us every day, twice and thrice a day; it doesn't matter. The only thing that concerns us is to be with Christ.

– Geronda, can someone live indolently and, when necessary, confess boldly?

– For someone to be able to do that, he must have inner goodness, sacrifice. That is why I said nobility and the spirit of sacrifice must be cultivated. One should sacrifice himself for others. Do you know about Saint Boniface and Saint Aglaia?[12] They lived that wretched life in Rome, but as soon as they sat down to eat, their mind went to the poor. They ran first to give food to the poor and then they sat down to eat themselves. Even though they were overcome with passions, they had goodness and truly cared about the poor. They had a sense of self-sacrifice and God helped them.

Even though Aglaia lived a sinful life, she loved the holy Martyrs and cared about the holy Relics. She instructed Boniface and other servants of hers to go to Asia Minor, to pay and gather the Relics of the Martyrs and bring them to Rome. And he told her in jest, "If they bring you my own relic, will you accept it?" But she told him, "Don't joke about such things." Finally, when he got to Tarsus and went to the amphitheatre to buy the holy Relics, he observed the tortures of the Christians and was immediately moved by their forbearance. He ran to them, kissed their bonds and wounds, and asked them to pray for him, so that he would be strengthened by Christ to publicly confess that he was a Christian. Then, he, too, confessed and was martyred in the amphitheatre, and his companions bought his Relic and took it to Rome, where an Angel of the Lord had informed Aglaia about this event. Thus, what Boniface had predicted in jest before leaving Rome, had happened. Later, after distributing her property to the poor, Aglaia lived another fifteen years as an ascetic and became a Saint. You see, they were not helped at first, and their life had deviated into evil. But they had the spirit of sacrifice and God did not abandon them.

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[10] Cf. 2 Cor 12:2.

[11] Cf. 1 Cor 12:31.

[12] The memory of Saint Boniface and Saint Aglaia is celebrated on December 19.

How Brave the Saints Were

– Geronda, I imagine that if I were to see the torture wheel of Saint Catherine, I would die of fear!

– If you died before you were placed on the wheel, this would be good; it would be a blessing from God. But if you were on the wheel and experienced difficulties there, that would be the torture. The Martyrs had a good disposition and with Christ's help endured their suffering.

What love the holy Martyrs had for Christ, what bravery! Saint Solomone with her seven children;[13] one by one they were martyred. Saint Longinos[14] prepared a meal for those who came to seize him and offered them hospitality. They were anxious to be shown who Longinos was so they could decapitate him, and he simply told them, "I will show him to you!" When he finally presented himself to them, they hesitated, but Saint Longinos urged them to carry out the orders they had been given, and so they decapitated him. Saint Gideon the Karakallenos[15] – what amazing forbearance he had! To his executioners he said, "Take my hand, take my leg, take my nose. In short, take everything!" Incredible! But for man to reach that point, he mustn't love himself, he must love God. A mother runs into a fire to save her child. She doesn't feel any pain because her love is stronger than the burning of the fire. Her love for her child masks the pain. So you can imagine how much more the love for Christ can mask the pain of martyrdom!

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[13] Their memory is celebrated on August 1.

[14] His memory is celebrated on October 16.

[15] His memory is celebrated on December 30.

For the Saint approaching martyrdom, the love for Christ is stronger than the pain and neutralizes it. The Martyrs felt the executioner's sword to be sweeter than the bow of a violin. When the love for Christ really blossoms, then martyrdom becomes a festival; fire refreshes better than a bath, because the burning feeling is dispelled by the burning of divine love. A flaying becomes a caress. Divine *eros* takes hold of the heart, takes hold of the mind, and man goes "mad". He does not feel the pain of anything else because his mind is on Christ and his heart is overflowing with joy. So many Saints went to their martyrdom and felt such joy, one would think they were going to a festival! Saint Ignatios[16] ran to his martyrdom shouting, "Let me go to my martyrdom; let the wild beasts devour me." The joy he felt is not even felt by the young man in love who says, "I want to marry her, and I don't care what anybody says, not even my mother or my father." The "madness" of Saint Ignatios was greater than the madness of a young man in love.

All of the Saints struggled for the Love of Christ. The holy Martyrs spilled their blood. The Saintly ascetic Fathers (Hosioi) shed sweat and tears and carried out spiritual experiments on themselves, like good herbalists, suffering themselves out of love for God and the image of God, that is man, in order to leave us their spiritual recipes. This way, we can prevent some evil or cure some spiritual sickness of ours and acquire health and, if we had the *philotimo* to offer ourselves to imitate them, we could even be sanctified.

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[16] His memory is celebrated on December 20.

Naturally, all of the struggles of the Saintly Fathers, the fasting, the vigils, and so forth, or the sufferings of all the holy Martyrs, cannot be compared with our Lord's Passion, because Christ helped them all out of His great love and sweetened their pain. But Christ did not use His divine power at all on Himself and He suffered great pain on His sensitive Body out of great love for His creation. If someone can experience this love of Christ for man, it is then that he can be also inwardly a true human being. Otherwise, he will be more insensitive than even God's inanimate creations, such as the sun, since it, too, felt Christ's Passion and darkened itself, being unable to bear the awful sight. The earth, too, shook with terror when it beheld the Passion of Christ. Even the rocks were broken into pieces. The tombs too were so shaken as to awaken many of the long dead, who came out to protest the people's ingratitude toward God, their Benefactor and Redeemer.

Monastics and Martyrdom

– Geronda, when someone does not do the necessary spiritual work, will he have the faith that God will help him when a difficult time comes, so he can call upon Him in prayer? Are we perhaps so put at ease by the thought that God will help us in our time of need, as to neglect the trouble of preparation?

– We must do the work of preparation. If one does not sow, how can he expect God to bless an abundant harvest of wheat? Man must sow, and, according to what

is sown, God will provide. Even in the army they say, *Be prepared.*

– Geronda, how are we to prepare ourselves?

– When is someone prepared? When the army is on the alert, the soldiers are always ready, with their boots on, with weapons in hand, with ammunitions, waiting for the command to go into battle.

– How long can one stay on the alert?

– It depends. A monk must always be prepared, and then he will never fear anything. What is there to fear? Death? Death will open the door to Paradise, for under the slab of the tomb lies hidden the key to eternity. Moreover, a monk is always in a state of repentance, no matter when he dies. His flight from the world and his monastic vows are a declaration of this. He repents and proceeds to do refined spiritual work. As the love for God and neighbour increases, so the love of and concern for self decreases. That's when what Saint Paul writes comes into effect: *Nothing can separate me from the love of Christ.*[17]

The thought of martyrdom compels worldly people to take refuge in God and to say in fear, "My Christ, My *Panaghia*," while the monk wants to be constantly near God because he loves Him. Many worldly people will do good simply out of fear of going to hell. But the monk does good out of gratitude, out of a desire to be thankful to God, his Benefactor.

– Geronda, how am I to feel martyrdom and monastic asceticism?

– For you to understand a little of what martyrdom means, be prepared to accept even contempt with joy.

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[17] Cf. Rom 8:35.

And if you want to feel a little what asceticism is, since you cannot fast for forty days as Christ did, fast at least one Wednesday, the day when He was betrayed, and one Friday, the day they crucified Him.[18] Those who desire to be martyrs out of love for Christ, but for whom there is no martyrdom, can express this burning love of theirs for Christ through a physical form of asceticism for the sake of those departed souls who are burning and need to find some rest. As martyrdom is a festival, asceticism is also a festival, for one finds divine consolation by avoiding all human consolation.

The holy Martyrs felt great joy when they had an opportunity to endure martyrdom. It was from this early martyrdom that asceticism had its beginning in the spiritual life. When Saint Constantine the Great came to power in the Empire, he released the Christians from the prisons – where they were being kept to gradually eliminate them – and the persecutions ended. But those in the prisons, who were waiting with joy for their turn to become martyrs, were greatly disappointed when Constantine the Great altered the course of events. Just when they were expecting to be martyred, they were set free. Consequently, out of love for God and the burning desire to be martyred, they took to the mountains. Thus, the suffering they would have endured under Diocletian and Maximinian, they imposed upon themselves through their ascetic rigours. One would go, with hands tied to ropes, and hang from a tree, praying with pain but with divine gladness. Another was bound for the love of Christ, saying, "This is how Diocletian used to have me tied up." And they felt great joy in enduring their now voluntary sufferings.

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[18] That is to abstain from food and drink for the entire day.

The first ascetics began with this divine madness and devoted themselves to asceticism for the love of Christ, and then they were imitated in these ascetic rigours by others who followed them. This is how asceticism entered into our religious way of life. Still others – perhaps even madder than the previous ones – said, "We are the sheep of Christ," and ate only of the grass of the field. These were the "herders". They lived so intensely aware of the benefits of God and their own insignificance that they used to say, "I am an ungrateful animal; all my life I shall eat grass." And this is what they did. They ate grass and rejoiced. Their heart would soar to heights out of love for Christ. They would simply say, "Am I not a sheep of Christ? I shall eat grass."[19] Later, however, the Church forbade this overly rigorous practice because hunters mistook these monks for wild animals and killed them.

Today people cannot understand these things; they consider them to be foolishness! "Why should I eat grass like an animal?" they say, or "For what reason should I be hanging from a tree like this and tormenting my body?" But do you see what Saint Isaac says? *May God grant us also to attain to such derangement,*[20] to attain such a spiritual irregularity.

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[19] See *Sozomen*, PG 67, 1395f. *Evagrios*, PG 86, 2480B. Moschos, PG 87, 2868B and Leontios PG 93,1688C.

[20] See Saint Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies*, Homily 35, p. 159.

PART FOUR

DEPENDENCE UPON HEAVEN

"God's help cannot be obstructed
by men or demons. Nothing is difficult for God,
nor for a Saint. The obstacle for us men
is our little faith, by which we prevent the great
divine powers from approaching us."

CHAPTER ONE

God's Providence For Man

"Seek First the Kingdom of God"[1]

Geronda, Abba Makarios says our God gives us heavenly gifts,[2] and this we believe. Should we believe He will also give us earthly gifts, which are not so important?

– What earthly gifts?

– Whatever we need.

– Yes, you put it well. God loves His creation, His image, and provides the things which man needs.

– Must everyone believe this and not worry?

– If one does not believe this and struggles by himself to acquire these earthly gifts, he will suffer. But even if God does not provide some of these earthly, material things, a person who is leading a spiritual life will not worry about it. If we seek first the Kingdom of God and this is our only concern, all the other things will be given to us, as well. Will God abandon His creation? The manna which God provided for the Israelites in the desert would spoil if they kept it for the next day.[3] God arranged things this way so that the people would have confidence in His divine providence.

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[1] Cf. Mt 6:33.

[2] See Saint Makarios of Egypt, *Spiritual Homilies*, PG 34, 460D-461A and 465D-468A.

We have not yet understood the words of Jesus, *Seek first the Kingdom of God.*[4] Either we believe or we don't. When I went to stay at Mount Sinai, I had nothing. But I didn't think at all what would become of me in the desert among strangers, what I would eat, how I would live. The ascetic cell of Saint Episteme, where I was to stay, had been abandoned and uninhabitable for years. As I didn't want to burden the Monastery of Saint Catherine, I didn't ask for anything. They brought me a little bread from the Monastery, but I returned it. Why should I be worried, when Christ said, *Seek first the Kingdom of God.* There was also very little water. I had no trade to work and earn my living. The only tool I had was a pair of scissors. I separated it in two, sharpened the two pieces on a stone, took a piece of wood and began making little carved wooden Icons. I worked and said the Jesus Prayer. Quickly I became experienced. I kept making the same design, and the work that would have taken me five days, I could now do in eleven hours, and not only did I help myself, but I also was able to help the little Bedouin children.

For a long time I worked on this task for many hours each day. Later I had reached a point where I did not want to continue with handicraft, but then I could see the need of the Bedouin children. If you gave them a cap and a pair of sandals, it was a great blessing for them. So, the thought came to me, "Did I come here to help the Bedouins or to pray for the whole world?' Thus, I decided to stop the work in order to be un-distracted and to pray more. And it wasn't as if I was expecting help from somewhere. The Bedouins did not even have enough to eat for themselves. The Monastery was far away. And in the opposite direction it was all desert. But on the same day when I cut back on the work to devote more time to prayer, someone came and found me at my cell and told me, "Here, take these one hundred liras to help the Bedouins without interrupting your program of prayer!" I could not bear this. I left my visitor alone and went into my cell for about fifteen minutes. The providence and the love of God had created such a spiritual state in me that I could not hold back my tears.

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[3] Cf. Ex 16:19-20.

[4] Cf. Mt 6:33.

Do you see how God provides when there is good will? How much could I have possibly given them? I would give to one child and another would come to remind me, "You didn't give me anything, Father." Then, yet another would come to say the same thing, "Father, you haven't given me anything!"

– Geronda, while many times we have felt the omnipotence of God, why is it that we do not also see His divine providence for us?

– This is a trap of the devil. The devil throws ashes in man's eyes so he won't see God's providence. For when man sees the providence of God, his granite heart will soften, become sensitive and burst out in praise of God, and this is not what the devil wants.

Man Often Decides Without God

Someone had made a fishery and all day long he would express his gratitude, "Glory be to You, O God," for he could see constantly the providence of God. He told me that a tiny fish, from the instant it is fertilized and is as tiny as the head of a pin, it also has a tiny pouch of liquid from which it feeds until it grows enough to be able to feed on the micro-organisms in the water. God provides for the tiny fish its own *compania*![5] If God provides for the tiny fish, how much more does He provide for man! But man often plans and decides for all things without God. He says, for example, "I am going to have two children." God is not brought into the equation, and so many accidents occur and so many children are lost. Most people have two children, one is involved in an automobile accident and the other becomes ill and dies, and then they have no children.

When parents, the co-creators with God, encounter difficulties, after all their efforts to settle their children, they should humbly seek the help of the Great Creator by stretching their hands toward Heaven. Then God is pleased and the parents are pleased to be helped. During the time I was in the Monastery of Stomion, I met the head of a family with many children. He was a rural policeman in a village of Epiros, four and a half hours on foot from Konitsa, where his family lived. He had nine children. Because the road to the village passed by the Monastery, that policeman would stop by on his way to work and on his way back home. On his way home, he

would ask me to let him light the oil lamps himself. Even though he would spill some oil, I would allow him to do it, preferring to clean up the tiles of the Church myself later rather than upset him. When he left the Monastery, at about three hundred meters distance, he would fire a shot with his gun. This I could not explain and so I decided to observe him from the moment he entered the Church until he left for Konitsa.

First he would light the lamps in the Church and then would go to the narthex. After lighting the oil-lamp over the entrance in front of the Icon of *Panaghia*, he would dip his finger into the oil of the lamp, go down on his knees, raise his arms toward the Icon and say, "Oh my *Panaghia*, I have nine children; provide a little meat for them." Then he would rub the oil from his finger on the sight on the barrel of his gun, and leave. Three hundred meters outside the Monastery, where there was a mulberry tree, a wild goat was waiting for him. He would take one shot, as I said, kill the goat, take it down a little way into a cave and skin it, and take it to his children. This would happen every time he returned home from his trip to work. I marvelled at the faith of the rural policeman and the providence of *Panaghia*.

After twenty-five years he came to find me on the Holy Mountain. At some point I asked him about his children, "How are your children? Where are they?" He then stretched his hand toward the north and said, "Some are in Germany," and then he stretched his hand toward the south and said, "Some are in Australia; glory be to God they are all healthy." That man had preserved his faith and himself pure of any atheistic ideologies, and, for this reason, God was with him and never abandoned him.

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[5] Compania: its own supply of food.

The Blessings of God's Amazing Providence

– Sometimes, Geronda, I have a wish, and God fulfils it, without me asking Him. How is this done?

– God has a way of providing. He sees our needs, our desires, and, when something is for our good, He gives it to us. When someone needs help in something, Christ and *Panaghia* help. The Elder Philaretos was often asked, "Geronda, what would you like us to provide for you?" And he would answer, "Whatever I want, *Panaghia* will send it." And that is what would happen. When we entrust ourselves to God, the Benevolent God looks after us and provides for us. Like a good provider, He gives each of us what is needed, and provides for our material needs even down to the smallest detail. And in order for us to feel His providential care, He gives us exactly what we need. However, you must not expect God to give you first; you must give yourself completely to God. For if you constantly ask of God, but do not entrust yourself completely to God, this implies that you have your own home and are estranged from the eternal heavenly Mansions. Those who give everything to God and entrust themselves to Him dwell under the great dome of God and are protected by His divine providence. Trust in God is a constant secret prayer that quietly brings the powers of God where they are needed and when they are needed, and then His *philotimo*-filled children constantly praise Him in gratitude.

Father Tychon, when he went to the *Kalyvi* of the Precious Cross, had no Chapel, even though this was essential for him. He didn't have any money to build one either; only a strong faith in God. One day he prayed and

set out for Karyes, with the faith that God will provide the means needed to build a Chapel. Before arriving at Karyes, the *Dikaios*[6] of the Skete of Prophet Elias called out to him from a distance. When Father Tychon drew near, the *Dikaios* told him, "Some good Christian from America sent me this money to give to some ascetic monk who has no Chapel. You don't have a Chapel, so take this money and build one." Full of gratitude, Father Tychon was moved to tears for the Benevolent God, Who knows everyone's heart, had already provided for the Chapel and had the money ready to give to him, when he was about to ask for help.[7]

When someone abandons himself to God, God does not abandon him. And indeed, if you need something tomorrow at ten o'clock, something that is not irrational but a real need, at nine-forty-five or at nine-thirty, God will have it ready for you. For example, you need a cup at nine o'clock. At five to nine, the cup arrives. You need five hundred drachmas. Just when you need them, five hundred drachmas exactly arrive for you; neither five hundred and ten nor four hundred and ninety. I have observed that if I, for example, need something tomorrow, God has foreseen this from today; that is, before I even think of it, God has already thought of it and provides it the moment I need it. For, from where it comes, to get to me exactly when I need it, I can see how much time is needed. Therefore, God has made a provision for it in advance.

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[6] The Elder of a *Kalyvi* to whom each year the responsibility is given to direct a Skete and to look after the *Kyriakon* (the central Church of each Skete) and the pilgrims.

[7] See Elder Paisios of Mount Athos, *Athonite Fathers and Athonite Matters*, p. 29.

When out of *philotimo* we make God rejoice over our life, then He bestows His blessings abundantly upon His *philotimo*-filled children, the moment they need them. After that, all of life flows with the blessings of divine providence. I can go on for hours relating to you examples of God's amazing providence.

When I was in the army, during manoeuvres, I had a New Testament and had given it to someone. Then I would say, "Oh how I wish I had a New Testament, it would be so helpful to me now." At Christmas two hundred packages were sent to us up on the mountain from Mesolonghi. From the two hundred packages only in my package was there a New Testament. It was an old New Testament and had a map of Palestine. In the package was a note saying, "If you need more books, write to us and we'll send them."

Later, in the Monastery of Stomion, I once needed a vigil oil lamp for the Church. One morning, at sunrise, I went down to Konitsa. As I was passing by a house, I heard a girl say to her father, "Father, the monk is here!" Then he came and told me, "Father Paisios, I have vowed to offer a vigil oil lamp for *Panaghia*; please take this money and buy one," and handed me five hundred drachmas – exactly the cost of a vigil lamp in 1958.

Even now, when I need something, God provides it at once. For example, I need to have some wood cut, but am unable to do it myself. The wood I need is then provided without delay. Before coming here, I received a package with fifty thousand drachmas, exactly the amount I needed. As a blessing I gave someone an Icon of *Panaghia Axion Estin*; the next day someone brought me an Icon of *Panaghia Portaitissa*.

This year[8] before it rained, I had no water at all. Now that it has rained, I collect a container and a half every day. The cistern has water from last year, but it's in disrepair. But, oh, how God provides! I have one barrel with water. So many people come each day, to drink, to wash and refresh themselves, and yet the level only goes down four or five fingers! One hundred fifty to two hundred people are served and the barrel is never empty. Some open the faucet a lot, while others forget to shut it off, and yet the water never ends.

Let Us Entrust Ourselves to Divine Providence

Whoever observes God's benevolence learns to rely upon divine providence. He then feels like an infant in a crib, crying when left alone for a little while by its mother, until she returns to its side. It is an important matter to entrust yourself to God.

When I first went to the Monastery of Stomion, there was no place for me to stay; the Monastery was completely full of rubble. I found a corner near the wall, made a temporary cover and spent the nights there in a sitting position, because there was no room to lie down. One day a priest-monk I knew came to me and said, "How can you stay here?" "Why not?" I said, "Did people in the world have any more than what we have? When Konstantinos Kanaris[9] asked for a loan, they told him, 'You have no country.' And he replied, 'We will acquire a country soon.' Now, if a man in the world had such faith, should we not have trust in God? Since *Panaghia* provided that I come to this Monastery, will She not also provide for Her Monastery when the time comes?" And indeed, little by little, *Panaghia* provided.

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[8] It was spoken in the summer of 1990.

[9] Konstantinos Kanaris (1793-1877): Hero of the Greek revolution of 1821, legendary fire-ship captain from the heroic island of Psara. He served as Prime Minister of Greece (1864-1865 and 1877).

I remember when they were pouring the cement to make the floors for the cells they had built, the prepared cement was not enough; they still had to work on a third of the floor. The builders came and told me, "The cement is running out; we'll have to thin it out to make it last for the entire floor." "No," I said to them, "continue to pour it normally." It wasn't possible to bring any more cement at the time, because the animals were away in the valley. The workers would have had to walk two hours to Konitsa and two more hours to the valley and the fields to find the animals. They couldn't have gone and returned in time. Also, the men had other work; they couldn't come back another day. I noticed they had poured two-thirds of the flooring. I went into the Chapel and said, "*Panaghia*, what is to happen now? Please help us." Then I went out...

– What happened, Geronda?

– The flooring was completed and there was extra cement left over.

– Did the workers realize it?

– How could they not realize it? Sometimes the help of God and *Panaghia* is very great indeed!

God Utilizes All Things For Good

– Geronda, we sometimes begin some work and then so many obstacles arise. How can we understand if the obstacles are from God?

– We must examine ourselves to see if we are at fault. If we are not at fault, the obstacle is most likely from God for our benefit. For this reason, no one should worry if the work was not done, or if it was delayed. Once I was coming down from the Monastery of Stomion and going to Konitsa for an urgent matter. At a difficult turn in the road – I called it Golgotha – I met uncle Anastasi, who was known to us in the Monastery, with three loaded animals. The steep terrain and the heavy load had caused their saddles to slip and one animal was in danger of falling off the edge of the road into the ravine. Uncle Anastasi said to me, "God sent you, Father." I helped him unload and reload the animals and put them back on the road and I left him. After continuing on my way for a considerable distance, I reached a point where a mudslide had just taken place, covering about three hundred meters of the road. Trees and rocks had fallen down into the river. If I had not delayed my journey, I would have been there precisely at the time the mudslide took place. So I said to myself, "Uncle Anastasi, you saved me. God sent you."

Christ from high above sees how each one of us acts, and knows how and when to act for our benefit. He knows how and where to guide us, as long as we ask for His help, tell Him our desires and allow Him to put things in order. When I was in the Monastery of Philotheou, I wanted to go to the wilderness; I was thinking of going to a deserted island. I had made arrangements with a boatman to take me there, but finally he never came. This was the dispensation of God, for I was still inexperienced, and would have come to great harm on the deserted island; the demons would have annihilated me.

Since I could not go there, I turned to Katounakia. I loved the wilderness of Katounakia, and I was praying and preparing myself to go there. I wanted to be a disciple of Father Petros,[10] a very Spiritual Father. But something happened that forced me to go to Konitsa and not to Katounakia. One night after *Apodeipnon*, I had gone into my cell and was praying until late. At about eleven at night, I lay down to sleep a little. At one thirty, I was awakened by the semantron of the Monastery calling us to the Church. I attempted to get up but it was impossible. An invisible power was keeping me motionless. I realized that something was happening. I was kept motionless on the bed until twelve noon. I could pray, I could think, but I could not move at all. While I was in that state, I saw as if on a television screen on one side Katounakia and on the other side the Monastery of Stomion in Konitsa. I turned my eyes wistfully towards Katounakia. A voice then – it was the voice of *Panaghia* – told me clearly, "You will not go to Katounakia; you will go to the Monastery of Stomion." "But my *Panaghia*, I asked for the wilderness and You are now sending me into the world?" I heard the same voice again but this time in a sterner tone, "You will go to meet so and so who will help you greatly." Immediately I was released from that invisible bond and my heart was filled with divine Grace.

Later I went and confided this matter to my Spiritual Father. And he told me that this was the will of God. He also advised me not to speak about this event, but to go, saying that for health reasons – I was coughing blood at that time – it was necessary for me to leave the Holy Mountain for a while. I wanted one thing, but God had another plan for me. I thought it was God's will for me to go there and help restore the Monastery, and thus fulfil the vow I had made to *Panaghia* during the war. I had said then, "*Panaghia*, help me become a monk and I will work for three years to rebuild your burned-out Monastery." As proven later by the events, the main reason for *Panaghia* sending me there was to help the eighty families who had become Protestants to return to the Orthodox Church.

God will often allow things that are for the benefit of the many to happen. He never does one single good alone, but several good things together. Nor does He allow some evil to occur, unless many good things are meant to come out of it. God uses everything for our benefit, including the bad and the dangerous. The good is mixed with the bad; it would have been good if they were separated, but when personal interests enter into the picture, they get mixed. But God can utilize even this mixture of good and bad. This is why we must believe that God allows things to happen, only when good can come out of them, for He loves His creation. For example, He may allow a small temptation to take place, in order to protect us from a greater one.

Once on the Holy Mountain a layman went to a monastery where they were celebrating their Feast Day. He drank a little wine and got drunk. When he left the monastery, he fell down on his back, and as it was snowing got covered by the snow. His pungent breath had opened a hole in the snow. At some point, a person passed by and saw the hole in the snow. "What's this, a spring?"

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[10] See Elder Paisios of Mount Athos, *Athonite Fathers and Athonite Matters*, p. 83-93.

he thought and poked it with his walking stick. "Ouch!" called out the drunk man from beneath the snow, and so God provided for this man to be saved.

God's Benefactions Break the Heart

– Geronda, what is it that God wants from us?

– God wants from us our good intentions, our good will, which will be expressed by even our limited but full of *philotimo* spiritual struggle, and the awareness of our sinfulness. Everything else is given by Him. One doesn't need muscles in the spiritual life. We must struggle humbly, we must ask for God's mercy and we must be grateful to Him for everything. He who abandons himself into the hands of God, without any plan of his own, will pass into God's plan. As long as man is hooked onto himself, he remains behind; he does not progress spiritually because he obstructs God's mercy. In order to grow spiritually he must place great trust in God.

At all times God caresses the hearts of all the people with His love, but we are not aware of it because our hearts have gathered a crust. When man has cleansed his heart, he is deeply moved and madly excited, because he can then see the benefactions, the blessings of God, Who loves all people in the same way. For those who are suffering, God is pained; for those who are living a spiritual life, He rejoices. When a *philotimo*-filled soul thinks of God's blessings, it is enough to send it exploding toward Heaven, even more so if the soul also meditates on its many sins and God's abundant mercy and compassion! When man becomes aware of God's providential care, and the eyes of his soul have been purified, he can experience and live the fullness of divine providence with his cleansed heart, which is then overwhelmed by a profound sense of gratitude and spiritual madness, in the good sense of the term. For God's blessings, when man is aware of them, create a crack in his heart, and break it. Then, as the hand of God caresses his *philotimo*-filled heart and touches the crack, man experiences an inner explosion that increases his gratitude toward God. All those who struggle and are aware of their sinfulness and God's blessings, entrusting themselves to His abundant mercy, elevate their soul to Paradise with great certainty and less bodily effort.

Gratitude to God For Little and For Much

Some people say, "I believe God will help me," and at the same time they try to make lots of money so that they won't be deprived of anything. These people mock God, because they do not entrust themselves to God, but to money. If they don't stop loving money and placing their hope in it, they won't be able to establish their hope in God. I'm not saying that people shouldn't put some money aside for a time of need; I'm saying that they shouldn't set their hopes on money and set their heart on it, because this way they forget God. Whoever makes his own plans, without putting his trust in God, and then says that this is how God wants it, is actually blessing his own work in a demonic way and is constantly tormented. We have not understood the power and goodness of God. We do not allow Him as Lord to govern us, and this is why we are tormented.

At Mount Sinai, in the ascetic cell of Saint Episteme where I lived, water was scarce. It dripped from a rock in a cave, some twenty meters from the cell. I had made a little cistern and gathered about three kilos of water every twenty-four hours. When I went to fetch the water, I dipped my tin cup in the cistern to fill it while reciting the Salutations to the Theotokos. With my hand, I would wet my brow a little, as a doctor had advised me, to help me. Then I would take a little water to have for drinking. I also took some water in a small can for the birds and the mice that lived in the ascetic cell. With this same water, I would also wash some clothing, and so forth. What joy, what gratitude I experienced for that small amount of water I had. I sang Doxologies for the water I had.

When I came to the Holy Mountain and stayed for a while at the Skete of Iveron Monastery, the place was sunny and had plenty of water. There was a cistern that filled up and the water overflowed. Here I could wash my feet and my head, but I had become forgetful of God. At Sinai, my eyes filled with tears of gratitude for the small amount of water, but at the Skete I became forgetful of God because of the abundance of water. For this reason, I went and lived some eighty meters away and had a small cistern. How one can lose himself, how one can become forgetful with an abundance of even ordinary material things!

We must unreservedly surrender ourselves to God's providence, to the divine will, and God will take care of us. A monk went one afternoon to read the Vespers Service on a hilltop. On the way there, he found a white mushroom and thanked God for the rare find. Upon returning, he would cut it and get through the evening with that. In the meantime, he thought to himself, "If laypeople ask me if I eat meat, I can tell them that I do every autumn." Upon his return, he found the mushroom to be halved in size – some animal must have stepped on it – and he said, "It seems that this is all I was supposed to eat." He picked it and thanked God for His providence, for the half mushroom. Further down he found another half mushroom and reached down to pick it, wanting to complete his evening meal, but because it seemed spoiled – perhaps even poisonous – he left it and thanked God again for saving him from being poisoned. He went to his *Kalyvi* and spent the night with half a mushroom for food. The next day, when he came out of his *Kalyvi*, he saw a wonderful sight! The whole area was filled with beautiful mushrooms, and he thanked God. You see, he thanked God for the whole mushroom and for the half mushroom, for the good one and for the spoiled one, for the one and for the many. He gave thanks for everything.

The Benevolent God provides an abundance of blessings and always acts for our good. All the good things we have are gifts from God. He has made everything to serve His creation, the human being, and to be sacrificed for him, animals and birds, small and large, even plants, – God, too, sacrificed Himself to redeem man. Let us not be indifferent to all His benevolence and cause Him grief through our great insensitivity and ingratitude, but, rather, let us thank Him and praise Him.

CHAPTER TWO

Faith and Trust in God

We Must Believe in God With Philotimo

Geronda, I am troubled by the thoughts of unbelief that come to me.

– The fact that you are troubled by them and do not accept them, means that these thoughts come from the evil one. Sometimes Christ allows thoughts of doubt or unbelief in order to test our disposition and our *philoti*mo, for our God is not a myth like Zeus, Apollo, but a real and living God, and our faith is a true and living faith. We have a cloud of witnesses in the Saints, as Saint Paul says,[1] who knew Christ, who lived with Him and who sacrificed themselves for Him. And in our own present time, there are people devoted to God who have heavenly experiences and are in communion with the Angels, the Saints and even with Christ and *Panaghia*. I'm going to share something from my own life to help you. You see, I, too, can be ... a "blood donor"; I reveal certain events to be helpful. Where I see heaped-up knowledge and neglected faith, I want to strengthen the faith by relating some events and examples of faith.

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[1] Cf. Heb 12:1.

When I was a young boy in Konitsa, I read about the lives of many Saints, and sometimes I gave the books to the other boys to read, or I would gather them in one place and we would read together. I marvelled at the great degree of asceticism and the fasting that the Saints did, and tried to do the same. From fasting, my neck had become as thin as a cherry stem. The children teased me. "Your head will fall of," they would say to me. What I had to put up with! Well, never mind. In addition, because I often got sick from fasting, my older brother was afraid that I would not be able to finish school, so he would take and hide my little pamphlets with the lives of the Saints. After that, I started hiding them in the forest, at the country Chapel of Saint Barbara, and would go there secretly to read them.

One day a neighbour named Kostas said to my brother, "I will make him change his way of thinking, throw away those booklets he is reading, and give up his fasting and prayer." He found me – I was about fifteen years old then – and he started talking to me about Darwin's theory. He started talking, and went on and on and was making my head spin. In my haze, I headed for the forest, to the Chapel of Saint Barbara. I went in and began praying to Christ. "My Christ, if You exist, reveal Yourself to me in some way," I kept saying, while constantly doing prostrations for a long time. It was summer. The sweat was running down my body, and I was drenched and completely exhausted. But I didn't hear or see anything. Nor did God help me in any way with even a small sign, some sound, some shadow; I was only a child, after all. Even if one were to look at this from a human and logical perspective, one could say, "My God, what a shame for the poor child. From eleven years old, he has been going up to the hills to live ascetically, and now he is going through a crisis. That man made his head spin with some foolish theories. At home, he has difficulties with his brother. He ran to the forest to seek help from You..." And yet nothing, nothing, nothing! Exhausted from the many prostrations, I sat down for a while. Then I thought, "All right, when I asked Kostas what he thought about Christ, what did he tell me? He told me that Christ was the best, the most righteous man Who proclaimed righteousness and had so offended the Pharisees that they crucified Him out of envy." Then I said, "If Christ was such a good man, so righteous, and no other man had ever appeared like Him, and others killed Him out of envy, then it is right of me to do for this man far more than I have done, even to die for him." As soon as I looked at it this way, Christ appeared to me in a great light – the Chapel was full of light – and told me, *I am the Resurrection and the Life. He that believeth in me, though he die, yet shall he live.*[2] These same words I could also read in the open Gospel which He held in one hand. There was such an inner transformation in me that I found myself saying constantly, "Come here now, Kosta, to discuss if there is or there isn't a God." You see, for Christ to appear He waited for my *philotimo*-filled response. Now, if Christ requires such a response from even a young child, can you imagine how much more He would expect from a mature adult?

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[2] Jn 11:25-26.

– Some people, Geronda, have their doubts about the Divine Plan of Salvation (Oekonomia) as a whole.

– But how can the whole story of Christ be considered a myth? All the things we read in the Prophets, who lived seven hundred years before Christ and speak of Him in such detail – doesn't this make them wonder? The Old Testament even refers exactly to the amount of money that would betray Christ.[3] Then it says that the Jews will not put this money into the treasury of the Temple, because it is blood money, but will use it to buy a field to bury strangers.[4] The prophecy of Zechariah was fulfilled, as were other prophecies. Things were made so clear! There were such tiny details! There is even a reference to Jesus's clothing and how it would be divided among the soldiers at the Crucifixion.[5] And all these things were spoken so many years before the Birth of Christ. How then can I bear a thought of doubt?

Also, we see the Apostle Paul. He was a persecutor of the Christians. He was on his way to Damascus for this purpose. But Christ appeared to him and said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And he asked, "Who are you, Lord?" And the Lord replied, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." And then the Lord informed Ananias to receive and baptize Saul.[6] After that, we see how much the Apostle Paul struggled and suffered to preach the Gospel to all the nations.

Then there are the innumerable Martyrs, estimated to be eleven million. Had all these people lost their mind?

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[3] Cf. Zech 11:1-13.

[4] Cf. Mt 27:6-9; Jer 18:2; 39:9 (LXX).

[5] Cf. Ps 22:18 (Ps 21:19 LXX).

[6] Cf. Acts 9:1-18.

How can anyone forget all of these things? How can one not believe after reading the Gospel even a little? And if there were a few more details, this, too, would help everyone to believe. But God did not permit this, for people need to pass through the sieve, to be tested; God wants to see who loves Him, who sacrifices himself for Him, without expecting miracles, and so forth. A *philotimo*-filled man, I believe, cannot be adversely affected, no matter how many blasphemous things he may hear.

One must believe in God with *philotimo*, not by expecting to be convinced through a miracle. When I see grown up people asking for a miracle in order to believe, I get very annoyed. If they were young children, there would be some excuse. But for adults who have done nothing for Christ to say, "We must see something in order to believe," well, this is very cheap. Even if they saw a miracle, do you think such people would be helped to believe? They would probably say that it's a trick, it's sorcery, and so on.

"Increase Our Faith"[7]

– Geronda, what distinguished certain Saints, older and more recent ones, and they knew when they would die, when some event would take place, and so forth?

– Their great *philotimo*, simplicity, humility and faith. They did not put into their life reasoning, which creates doubts and weakens faith. Faith is a tremendous thing! You see, it was through faith that the Apostle Peter walked on the waves. The moment he began to reason, he started to sink.[8] Have I told you about Father Charalampos[9] who lived a few years ago in the Monastery of Koutloumousiou? He was a very simple, industrious and spiritual monk. When he grew old, he was laid up with a very serious bout of flu, and the doctor told the Fathers not to leave his side, because in a few hours his life would end. When Father Charalampos heard this, he retorted from under his blankets, "That's what you think! I'm not dying until Pascha comes, and I have a chance to chant *Christ is risen*!" Indeed, two months passed, Pascha came, he said *Christ is risen*, received Holy Communion and then fell asleep in the Lord. This simple old monk, filled with *philotimo*, had become a child of God, and together with God had determined the time of his death!

– Geronda, how is faith strengthened?

– Faith is strengthened through prayer. Someone who didn't cultivate and strengthen his faith from a young age, but who has a good disposition, can cultivate his faith through prayer, asking Christ to increase his faith. We can ask Christ to add to our faith and to increase its strength. What did the Apostles say to the Lord? Didn't they say, *Increase our faith*? When you say "increase", you are entrusting yourself to God. For if one does not entrust himself to God, what is God to increase in him? We ask God to increase our faith, not so that we can do miracles, but to love Him all the more.

Everything can help to increase our faith in God; the flowers and the locusts, the stars, even lightning can help. We all see these things around us, but we are not all helped, because we receive the "telegraphic messages", the thoughts of the enemy. For example, if there were no salt, the sea would smell bad. Whoever examines this fact with his reasoning, without faith, is not helped, because he has not cleansed his heart from the salt deposits. But if one works with *philotimo*, with good thoughts, even the most contrary and difficult things can be seen in another light – the light of divine enlightenment that moves us to glorify God.

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[7] Lk 17:5.

[8] Cf. Mt 14:30.

[9] See Elder Paisios of Mount Athos, *Athonite Fathers and Athonite Matters*, p. 18-20.

All Things Should Raise Us to God

– Geronda, you have told us that all things should raise us upward to God. How can we achieve this?

– By utilizing everything for the good. When everything is geared to the spiritual life, do you know how much spiritual benefit can be derived, and what spiritual experience can be achieved? For example, you touch cement and you can find God! You touch brick and you touch God! You touch this, you touch God! You touch that, you touch God! You touch something else and you touch God! Yes, touch God through everything! If one does not approach the spiritual life this way, if one does not see God in everything he does, then he will still be far from God even if you place him in the Church. Give him the hymns of the Church to chant and he will still be far from God. Give him a spiritual book to read and again he will be far from God. Whatever spiritual things you give him to do, it will not lead him to God.

Everyone, whatever he sees, whatever he does, whether he is sewing clothes or embroidering, must utilize everything spiritually. Does he look upon flowers? He has looked upon God. Does he look upon swine? Yes, my child, again he has seen God. But you might ask, "How can I see God through the swine?" You see how the benevolent God has made the swine, giving them a snout with which to find the wild bulbs in the earth without seeing them. Its nose is so made that it doesn't get cut when it encounters sharp objects, glass, thorns, and so on. One should say that God has created with wisdom, not only when he sees the fragrant and beautiful flower, but also when he sees the swine; there, too, he should see God. And if I think how God could have made me into a pig rather than a man. Does this seem strange to you? Couldn't God have made us into swine? Many times hunters will wound a wild boar and be unable to find it. Then other wild beasts go and eat the poor wounded boar while it's still alive. It doesn't have any medical care and it suffers, even though it has not in any way injured its Creator. Whereas human beings have wounded their Creator and continue to wound Him constantly, often showing gross ingratitude.

This is why I say that you should work on the spiritual life in the right way. How the good God has created everything! What power He gives to the animals! The doctor says, "Eat meat to have strong muscles." And you see the poor bulls eating only grass, and yet they have such strength. Don't you see God in that? That is, they eat only grass and God makes them so strong. Imagine what He does for humans! Do you understand?

When someone is working this way in the spiritual life, he can reach a state of being where he's helped not only by the Saints, but by the sinners, too. The Saints strengthen us with their holy example. The sinner, through his fall, restrains us, reins us in; he puts the brakes on us, not so that we won't fall in the eyes of others, but so that we won't disappoint God.

The Power of Faith

– Geronda, what is the seal of the Lamb?

– Who is the Lamb?

– Christ.

– What is His seal? When a Christian is baptized, the priest seals him with the sign of the Cross on his forehead using the Holy Myron, saying "The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit." Then, each time the Christian makes the sign of the Cross, he reverences the saving Passion of the Lord and invokes the power of the Cross, which is the power of the death of our Christ on the Cross. When we say, *Oh, Cross of Christ, save us through your power*, we invoke the power of the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. The Cross has great power. For example, if it is raining and lightening bolts are coming down, one of them can strike a large metal cross on a church bell tower. But if a Christian is down there who has a small cross and says, *Oh Cross of Christ, save us through your power*, the lightening bolt does not strike him. In the first instance, the laws of nature are at work, and the lightening bolt strikes the metal cross and knocks it down. In the second instance, a tiny little cross protects the Christian, because he invokes the power of the Cross of Christ.

– Geronda, why is it that, even though I ask for something with faith, God does not grant it?

– You may believe, you may ask, but if you are not

humble, or if you tend to be proud, God does not provide. One may have faith not only like a tiny *grain of mustard seed*[10] but even like a whole kilo of mustard seeds. But if one does not also have the corresponding humility, God does not act, because man cannot benefit under such circumstances. When there is pride, faith is not active.

When someone goes through life with faith, without doubt, and asks for God's help, he will experience gradually in the beginning small events and later greater ones and will become more faithful. Living the divine mysteries up close, he becomes a theologian, because he doesn't comprehend them with his mind but actually lives them. His faith keeps growing, because he moves in another sphere, with divine events. But in order to live the mysteries of God, one must be divested of the old self, and, in a sense, return to the condition before the Fall. One must have innocence and simplicity so that his faith may be unshakeable and absolutely certain that there is nothing God cannot do. Then, when he hears about a person who does not believe or who has doubts about certain things concerning God's help, do you know how much he suffers?

– Geronda, when someone believes, can he alter the outcome of some situation through prayer?

– If he has great faith, he can change many things. Even if he has built his house on the course of a mountain torrent and the torrent brings down much water, if he believes with certainty and prays to God fervently, the torrent will change direction. But he must have such faith that if he hears, for example, that a miracle has taken place, and the sea has emptied, and people are ploughing it with tractors and hauling the fish with trucks, he will believe it. He will not want to go and see for himself. Even if he lives only a hundred meters from the sea and can't see it from where he is, still, he won't go to check whether it is true or not, simply because he does not doubt. He knows that all things are possible for God, that the divine power is not limited, and for this reason he is not curious. That is how much faith he has. Only one who truly believes can truly live and be a true man of God.

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[10] Mt 17:20; Lk 17:6.

Trust in God Is a Child of Faith

– Geronda, I feel insecure, I am anxious.

– Insure yourself, my child, in God. Do you only know about car insurance? Aren't you familiar with God's insurance? Make the sign of the Cross before you do anything, and say, "My Christ, help me. My *Panaghia* help me." Is there any greater insurance than our trust in God? When man entrusts himself to God, he receives a constant supply of "super gasoline" and his spiritual vehicle never stops; it runs constantly. As far as possible, be careful, pray and entrust yourself to God, and He will help you in every difficulty. Simplify your life with an absolute trust in God, and you will be freed from any stress and anxiety.

– Geronda, when people tell me to do something, I always start out with a certain fear, a certain hesitation, and in the end I may not do the work properly because of my fear.

– Make the sign of the Cross, my good child, and do what you have been told to do. If you say, *Through the prayers of our Holy Fathers...*, there are so many Saints, don't you think one of them will help you? Never lose your trust in God. Don't strain yourself with your narrow human reasoning, which torments you and obstructs divine help. By entrusting yourself and your work to God, besides your prudent human activity, you will certainly be greatly helped and others will be helped as well. Entrusting ourselves to God is of tremendous importance.

Once they had to draw some blood from me. There were four nurses. The first came and tormented me but couldn't find a vein. The second nurse had the same trouble. The third nurse was more experienced and she tried but again with no results. At that moment a fourth nurse came by. She noticed how the others had tormented me and she also tried. First, she made the sign of the Cross, and, immediately, she found a vein to draw my blood, because she had asked for God's help. The others, in a sense, relied only upon themselves.

It's a great thing to put oneself into God's hands. People set goals and try to achieve them without listening carefully to hear the will of God and without trying to conform to it. We must entrust ourselves to God and allow Him to direct our life, while we do our duty with *philotimo*. If a person does not entrust himself to God, so as to abandon himself entirely into God's hands, he will be tormented. People usually first turn to human consolation and, when disappointed by them, then they take refuge in God. But if we want to avoid being tormented, we must first seek divine consolation, which is, after all, the only true consolation. It is not enough merely to have faith in God;[11] one must also have an absolute trust in God. Trust in God attracts His help. The Christian believes and entrusts himself to God unto death, and then he can see clearly the hand of God guiding and saving him.

The Apostle Paul says that faith is believing in the things we don't see, not merely in the things we do see.[12] When we place our future in God's hands, we oblige Him to help us. Absolute trust in God is born of faith, with which we pray in secret and enjoy the fruit of hope. It is a constant prayer which brings divine results at the right time. It is then that man lives an angelic life and bursts out in praise, *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord.*[13] For man can make of his life a life in Paradise, if he trusts God, praises Him for everything and accepts Him as a Loving Father guiding his life. Otherwise, he can make his life hell. It is a wonderful thing for man to be able to experience from this life a measure of the joy of Paradise.

– Geronda, concerning physical and mental health, to what extent must one put himself into the hands of God?

– First one must entrust himself to God, and after God, he will also entrust himself to the appropriate person.

Faith and Love

– Geronda, what is the relationship between faith and love?

– First comes faith and then love. One must believe in order to love. One cannot love something he does not

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[11] Here faith has the meaning of simply accepting the existence of God, which is not sufficient for a life in Christ.

[12] Cf. Heb 11:1-3.

[13] Isa 6:3.

believe in. So to love God we must believe in God. The greater our faith, the greater our hope and love and sacrifice for God and our neighbour. A fervent faith in God brings forth a fervent love for God and for the image of God, our fellow man. Out of the abundance of our love – that cannot be contained in the heart and overflows – the poor animals also benefit. We believe strongly and we love strongly. If our faith is lukewarm, our love will be lukewarm. If our faith is fervent, our love will be fervent.

Our faith must have *philotimo*, and that's where the *philotimo*-filled struggle begins. And the more we struggle with *philotimo*, the more our faith will increase, and the more our love will increase. In this *philotimo*-filled struggle, it helps greatly to keep God's blessings in mind. Someone who has a strong sense of *philotimo* does not wonder if there is Paradise, but struggles, because he believes and loves God. Whereas someone who does not have *philotimo* will begin to wonder, "Why should I even struggle? Does Paradise really exist? Will there be a Judgment Day?" And when someone is ungrateful, no matter what you do for him, he will still be ungrateful. Whereas the man who has *philotimo* praises God even in a time of temptation and will gradually start being continuously grateful to God. That's when the divine transformation comes to his soul, keeping him in constant joy and gladness. Another person may have no temptations or trials of any kind, and only have blessings, and yet will never be satisfied with anything.

After our love for God, comes sacrifice. And when there is sacrifice without any trace of selfishness, then one begins to be blessed with divine events. I must make a sacrifice for no other reason than for God Who created this universe and provides us with so many blessings. You see, even the pagans who deified aspects of nature, worshipping the sun, the great rivers, often sacrificed themselves for this faith of theirs. If they sacrificed themselves for creation, how much more should we sacrifice ourselves for the Creator!

People don't believe and so they don't sacrifice themselves. All our indifference stems from this. One blasphemes and curses the holy and sacred things, while another half-believes and is tormented. For one to have true, spiritual joy, he must have faith and love.

"Apart From Me You Can Do Nothing"[14]

If man is to stop being tormented, he must believe in what Jesus Christ said, *Apart from me you can do nothing*. This means that man must lose hope in himself, in a good sense, and put his faith and trust in God. When someone loses hope in himself, again in the good sense, it is then that he finds God. *My every hope I place in You.*[15] Even the most spiritual people do not have their life secured, and that's why they keep themselves constantly in the security of God, entrusting themselves to God and giving up any hope in their own "ego", for it is this "ego" which brings man every spiritual misfortune.

Self-confidence is our greatest and worst enemy, because it can suddenly blow us up and leave us in utter misery on the street. When man has self-confidence, he is bound and unable to do anything, or is left to struggle

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[14] Jn 15:5.

[15] Theotokion hymn of Tone Two.

alone. Then he will unavoidably be overcome by the enemy, or fail in his efforts, thus annihilating his "ego". Often the Benevolent God very wisely provides for us also to see His divine intervention and the failure we had with our self-confidence. When one observes and examines every event that occurs in his life, he acquires experience, becomes careful and thus progresses.

Christ first asked for faith in the power of God and only then would perform a miracle. *If you believe in the power of God, you will be healed,*[16] He used to say. Not as some wrongly say today, "Man has powers, and if he believes in his powers, he can do anything. Doesn't the Gospel teach us to 'believe'? We agree, therefore, with that teaching." Yes, Christ did say "Believe", but He meant "Do you believe in God? Do you believe that God can do this?" He required an affirmation that the man believed in God, and then He would help. Nowhere does the Gospel tell you to believe in your self, but to believe in God, that God can help, that God can heal. Some people however take this the wrong way and say, "Man has powers and must believe in himself." To believe in one's self contains either egoism or demonism.

– Geronda, when a miracle happens, these people say that it occurred because the person involved believed it could happen.

– The activity of the devil is hidden behind this egotistical position. They confuse what Christ said about believing in God with their own belief in themselves. This is where all the demonism in the world today begins. And they tell you, "Have no respect for young or old, to acquire your own personality." This is why you hear slogans like, "Trample on them, destroy them, so that you can succeed." Respect is considered to be the established conformity and so without it the devil triumphs. If a child speaks even slightly impudently to his parents or elders, the Grace of God abandons him. How much more so if man makes this behaviour the norm!

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[16] Cf. Mt 9:29; Mk 9:23.

– What do you say when someone claims to believe in God, but does not believe that God protects us?

– Then he makes himself god. How does he believe in God?

– Every morning he makes the sign of the cross, and so forth.

– He then says, "I believe in God, but God gave us a brain to think with and to do whatever we want." Or he may say, "I am god. Doesn't the Sacred Scripture say, *You are gods, and all of you sons of the Most High*?[17] He doesn't think that to be god through grace, one must have the Grace of God; but in his mind he simply makes himself god. It is one thing to have the Grace of God and to become god through grace, and quite another to make himself god. This is the confusion: He makes himself god and finally ends up becoming an atheist.

A Time Will Come When All Will Believe

– Geronda, how does it happen that people with faith end up becoming atheists?

– On this subject there may be two possible cases. In one case, a person can be very faithful, with the power of God active in his life and obvious in many events. But then this same person becomes confused on the subject of faith. This happens, for example, when someone undertakes the ascetic life with egoism; approaching the spiritual life in an indiscriminate and selfish manner. He says for example, "Whatever Saint so and so did, I will also do," and his spiritual exercises are indiscriminate. Gradually, however, without realizing it, he comes under the illusion that even if he hasn't yet reached the stature of Saint so and so he must be close. So he continues his spiritual exercises. But, while divine Grace assisted him before he had this thought, now it begins to abandon him. For, what does the Grace of God have to do with pride? Consequently, he can no longer do the ascetic work as he did before, and he now has to exert himself. This exertion leads to anxiety. Pride follows suit with its accompanying turmoil, creating confusion. And whereas before he had done so much and divine Grace was active with spiritual events, he slowly begins to have thoughts of disbelief and to doubt the existence of God.

The second case is when an illiterate person decides to concern himself with the doctrines of the faith. Well, he just isn't well. It's one thing to take a look at the doctrines and become somewhat familiar with them. But even a well-educated person, if he approaches the doctrines with pride, will be deprived of divine Grace and begin to have doubts. Of course, I am not referring to someone who is devout. Even if uneducated, he can take a discreet look at the doctrines of the faith, to the extent of his ability, and come to understand them quite well. But if an unspiritual person starts concerning himself with the doctrinal aspects of the faith, he, even though he may have believed a little before, will now not believe at all.

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[17] Ps 82:6 (Ps 81:6 LXX).

– Geronda, unbelief has spread widely in our time.

– Yes, but often you can see even among those who say they don't believe in God that there is still a little hidden faith in them. Once a young man told me, "I don't believe there is a God." "Come a little closer," I told him. "Do you hear that nightingale singing? Who gave that beautiful gift to that bird?" At once, the poor young man was moved, and the harshness of unbelief went away and the appearance of his young face was altered.

Another time two visitors had come to my *Kalyvi*. They were about forty-five years old and lived a very worldly life. As we monks say, "Because this life is vain, we reject everything," they too, but from the opposite point of view, said, "There is no other life," and while still young, abandoned their studies and began to live a completely worldly life. They had reached the point of becoming spiritual and physical wrecks. The father of one died from worrying about him. The other squandered his mother's property and made her suffer from a heart condition. After our conversation, they saw things differently. "We have become useless," they admitted. I gave one an Icon for his mother. I went to give the other an Icon, but he wouldn't accept it. "Give me one of those little boards you are sawing," he said. "I don't believe in God; I believe in the Saints." Then I told him, "Whether it's a mirror or a cover from a tin can, unless the rays of the sun fall upon it, it won't shine. The Saints were enlightened by the rays of the Grace of God, just as the stars receive light from the sun."

Those poor young people today are so confused over the various theories they are taught. I had once observed at the *Kalyvi* two Marxists about fifty years old who joined the groups of young people in order to confuse them with their theories. Marxists do not believe, so when you try to prove to them the existence of God, they condemn God and ask endless questions: why this and why that and so forth. The Prophet Isaiah says that those who do not want to be saved do not understand.[18] Once I told them, "Do you see the stars? They are not bolted up there; someone is holding them up in the Heavens. Everything the Prophets said about Christ was fulfilled. We have so many Martyrs who were formerly unbelievers, executioners, pagans, and then believed in Christ and became His witnesses. Some had their tongues severed so they would not speak of Christ, and without a tongue they became more eloquent witnesses to Christ! Every day we have so many Saints who are celebrated. The Saints are a living presence. And even when we don't find them, they find us! Many desert ascetics, who don't have a calendar, and don't know which Saint is to be celebrated on a given day, will say, 'Saints of this day, intercede for us.' And these Saints will appear to them and reveal their names, which are sometimes difficult and unfamiliar names. Later the ascetics will look at a calendar and notice that on such and such a date the Saints who appeared to them were celebrated.[19] What do you think of that?" Then the Marxists again responded by asking, "Why do Saints go to the monks and not to the people who need them?" "How did you come here?" I asked them, "by plane?" "No, by car," they replied. "Good, on the way here, how may roadside shrines did you see? They didn't just sprout from the ground with the spring rains. People were helped by the Saints, and, out of devotion, have built those shrines and now light the lamps to honour the Saints. The more spiritual people get rid of material things, the more they rise toward Heaven. Materialists also enjoy something; they make, for example, so many cups, they make so much money. And if they make more cups, they earn more money. But you make your propaganda only and stop there; you have nothing to enjoy. You are the most unfortunate of all, because, should you achieve what you want, you will have no other ideal but the torment of a Marxist slavery." Finally they complimented me, "Father, you are a very good man, righteous, wise..."

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[18] Cf. Isa 6:9-10.

[19] On June 3, 1979, because the Elder did not remember which Saint was to be celebrated on that day and he could not find his glasses to check the calendar – he had just moved in his *Kalyvi* at *Panagouda* but was not yet settled – he was doing the *komboschoini* prayers by saying, "Saints of this day, intercede for us." Then Saint Lukillianos, who is celebrated on that day, appeared to him and repeated three times his difficult name.

In any case, whether people want it or not, a time will come when everyone will believe, because they will reach an impasse and Christ will intervene.

CHAPTER THREE

Where Man Cannot Reach, God Provides Help

God Helps With What Cannot Be Achieved by Man

What's that smoke over there?

– We're burning something, Geronda.

– You started a fire with such a wind?

– Geronda, it rained this morning.

– Even if it rained and there was a deluge, still, if a strong wind comes, it will dry up everything so much that it can burn like gunpowder. "It rained this morning", she says! Some time ago, a fire started down there because of your foolishness, have you forgotten? If someone makes a fool of himself once, he must then be very careful. God helps wherever He must, where man cannot act by himself; He will not help in our negligence. That way we will make fools even of the Saints.

– Geronda, do we always know how far we can act without God's help?

– To begin with, this is obvious. But even if someone has the good will to do what he is capable of doing and doesn't do it because of some obstacle, God will help him at a difficult moment. But if he lacks the will, while having the strength, God will not intervene to help. For example, they tell you to lock the door at night, and you neglect to do it, because you are too lazy to walk over to the door, and you think to yourself "God will protect us, after all." This is not a case where you don't lock up because you trust God, but because you are lazy. How then can you expect God to help? You want Him to help a lazy person? When I tell someone to lock up and he doesn't, his disobedience alone calls for punishment.

Whatever someone can do within his human ability, he should do, and whatever he can't do, he should leave to God. And if he should do a little more than he is able, not out of pride but out of *philotimo*, believing that he has not exhausted what is humanly possible, again, God will be moved by this. In order for God to help, He expects to see us make an effort. You see, Noah struggled for one hundred years to build the ark. They had to cut the lumber with wooden saws. They used the really hard wood to make saws for the softer wood. Couldn't God have done something to expedite the building of the ark? God instructed them how to build it and then gave them the power to do it.[1] This is why we should do what we can, so that God may do whatever we cannot.

Someone came to the *Kalyvi* and told me, "Why do the monks sit here and not go into the world to help people?" "If they did go into the world to help people, you would probably ask why they wander around the world. Now that they don't, you ask why not," I told him. Then he went on to say, "Why do monks have to go to doctors and are not helped by their Christ and their *Panaghia* to

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[1] Cf. Gen 6:13 f.

get well?" "That same question was asked of me by a Jewish doctor," I told him. "He's not a Jew," offered another man who was with the inquirer. "It doesn't matter if he isn't a Jew," I said. "What matters is that it's a Jewish question. And I will share with you the answer I gave to the Jewish doctor, since the case is similar. So I told him, 'As a Jew, you should know the Old Testament well. In Isaiah it is written that God granted King Hezekiah an additional fifteen years of life because he was very good. He sent the Prophet Isaiah to tell the King, 'God grants you fifteen more years of life because you destroyed the sacred groves of the pagans. And for your wound – the king had a wound – you should use a *tsapella*[2] of figs and you will be healed!' Now, since God granted him fifteen more years of life, couldn't He also have healed the wound? But that wound was to be healed with poultice made of dry figs."[3] We should not expect God to do the things we can do for ourselves. We should humble ourselves before our fellow human beings and ask them for their help.

Up to a certain point man must act in a human manner and only after that rely on God. It is egotistical to try to help in something that cannot be done by human means. In many cases where someone insists on helping, I see that it is a matter of temptation to render him useless. When I see that a situation cannot be helped any more by human means – perceiving more or less to what extent man can help and at what point he must then leave it to God – I raise my hands to God, light two candles, and leave the problem to God, Who takes care of it immediately. God knows that I do not do this out of laziness.

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[2] A bunch of dried figs strung together on a string or a bulrush.

[3] Cf. Isa 38:4 f.

For this reason, when people ask us for help, we must be discerning and help in whatever way we can. But when we are unable to help in any other way, we should at least help with a prayer or by turning the matter over to God; for this, too, is a secret prayer.

God Always Provides For Our Good

God is kind by nature and always provides for our good and, when we ask Him for something, He will provide it, as long as it is for our good. Whatever is necessary for the salvation of our soul and for the maintenance of our physical existence, God will provide it in abundance, and we'll have His blessing. Whatever He deprives us of, either to test us or to protect us, we accept with joy as well as with thoughtfulness, as it is for our benefit. God knows when and how to provide for His creation. He helps in His own way at the right time. However, often His weak creation is anxiously impatient because the moment we ask for something, we want to receive it, like a little child who wants the cookie from its mother even before it is baked. We shall ask, we shall be patient and when it is ready, our Good Mother, *Panaghia*, will give it to us.

– Geronda, when do the Saints help?

– Whenever it is necessary to help and not when we think it is time to help. In other words, they help when it will be beneficial for us. Do you understand? A child, for example, asks his father for a motorcycle, but the father doesn't buy it. The child then says, "I want the motorcycle because I get tired walking to school, to work." Still the father doesn't buy it because he is afraid of the dangers involved. "I will buy you a car later when you grow up," he tells his son. So they put the money in the bank and when enough money has been saved and the boy is more mature, they'll buy him a car. In the same way, the Saints know when they should help us.

– Geronda, how do we feel God's mercy?

– God's mercy is the divine consolation that we feel in us. God arranges it so that we cannot be content and at ease in human consolation, and we take refuge in divine consolation. You see, for example, the Greeks in Australia, who found themselves entirely alone there, came closer to God than other emigrants, such as those in Germany, who were closer to their country and found many other Greeks there. The difficulties of life they encountered helped them to anchor themselves to God. They all left with a few belongings, they found themselves far away from their country, far from relatives; they needed to find work, to find a teacher for their children, and so on, without receiving any help from anywhere. This is why they turned to God and held on to their faith. Whereas in Europe, the Greeks didn't have these difficulties and so don't have this closer relationship with God.

"Ask, and It Shall Be Given You"[4]

– Geronda, since God knows our needs, why must we ask for His help?

– Because there is freedom. And especially when we have compassion for our neighbour and ask God to help him, God is deeply moved and will then intervene without infringing upon man's free will. God has every good intention to help people who are suffering. But to help them, someone must ask Him. For if God helps someone, without anyone having made the request, then the devil will complain and say, "Why do you help him and infringe upon his free will? He is a sinner, he belongs to me." Here one can see the great and spiritual nobility of God, Who does not allow even the devil the right to complain. For God wants us to ask Him to intervene – and He wants to intervene directly if it is for our good – and to help His creatures according to their needs. God acts separately and specifically for each person, as is best for each.

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[4] Mt 7:7.

For God and the Saints to help someone, he himself must want it and ask for it, otherwise they do not intervene. Christ asked the paralytic, *Would thou be made whole?*[5] If man does not want it, God respects that. If someone doesn't want to go to Paradise, God doesn't take him, unless he was wronged out of ignorance, in which case he is entitled to divine assistance. Otherwise, God does not want to interfere. Someone asks for help and God and the Saints offer it. In the blink of an eye, they have already offered their help. Sometimes you don't even have the chance to blink; so quick is God to stand beside you.

Ask, and it shall be given you,[6] the Sacred Scripture says. If we do not ask for help from God, we will fall flat on our face. Whereas, when we do ask for divine help, Christ will bind us with a rope to His Grace and will uphold us. The wind may blow fiercely from all directions, but, because we are bound fast, we are not in danger. But when man does not realize that it is Christ who upholds him, he may unbind himself, in which case he will be buffeted left and right and tormented.

You must know that only passions and sins are ours. Whatever good we do is from God, whatever foolish things we do come from us. When God's Grace abandons us for just a little while, we become unable to do anything. As in natural life, when God removes oxygen from us we die immediately. The same is true for spiritual life; if God removes His Grace, we are lost.

Once I felt a certain gladness during prayer. For hours I stood in prayer, and did not feel at all tired. The more I prayed, the more I felt a sweet ease, a delight that I cannot express. Later, a human thought came to me: Because I am missing two ribs and can easily catch colds, I thought of wrapping myself with a shawl to avoid getting cold later; I didn't want to lose the state I was in, but wanted to prolong it as much as possible. As soon as I accepted this thought, I collapsed to the floor. I remained on the floor for half an hour, before I could get up and go into the cell to lie down. Before that, while I was in prayer, I felt like a feather, very light, with a delight that cannot be expressed. But as soon as I accepted that human thought, I collapsed. If I had then a proud thought and said, for example, "I doubt if there are more than two or three people who are in the spiritual state I am in now," surely I would have suffered serious harm. My thought was a human one, just like that of a lame man who thinks to take his crutches; it was not a demonic thought. It was

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[5] Jn 5:6.
[6] Mt 7:7.

only a thought of natural reasoning, and you saw what happened to me.

The only thing man has is his will, and God helps him according to this will. This is why I say that all the good things we may have are gifts from God. Our works are zero, and our virtues are a long series of zeros. We must try to constantly add zeros and beseech Christ to put a digit at the beginning so that we may become rich. If Christ doesn't put the digit at the beginning, our efforts will be in vain.

The Grace of God Is Attracted by Humility

– Geronda, I have difficulties in my struggle.

– Do you ask for help from Jesus Christ or are you struggling alone? Have you told Christ of your weakness? You don't humble yourself, you don't ask Christ for help and then you say, "I have difficulties in my struggle." When one is humble and asks for help from Christ, He helps. Often man makes an egotistical effort and this is why he gets no help. Throw your ego out, don't take it into account, and the Grace of God will dwell in you. We wish to acquire sanctity by magic, but if we are in the wrong spiritual state Christ will not help. Even if only a minimal amount of selfishness enters into the situation, divine help is obstructed.

– When I have the desire to be corrected, won't God help me to realize some weakness of mine?

– For God to help, one must have a desire to struggle. And when we say a desire to struggle, we mean that one must be willing to make some effort to overcome his particular weakness. If God sees even a little true will, He provides abundant help for man, He sends His Grace in great abundance. That's how man enters the channel of God.

– Geronda, to what extent does God help us in our spiritual struggle?

– To the extent that we help God to help us. When you ask God for something, and for a long time He doesn't help, you should know that there is pride. If we have passions, for example, gluttony, vain talk, anger, envy and so forth, and in addition to that we also have pride, God won't help because we are obstructing divine Grace with our passions. And even if we have only a tendency to pride in us, we still obstruct God from helping us, though we may be struggling and perhaps praying more than is needed. It is out of the question for God not to help someone, unless there is concern that this person will become proud. As soon as the tendency to be proud is dispelled and man regains his natural spiritual health, then God will deliver him directly from the passion which torments him, and will also reward him for his extra effort in the struggle. For this reason, in order for God to help us, we must help God with our humble thought. We should say, "Oh my God, I am such a useless person, please forgive me and help me." Then God helps, because the soul, entrusted into the hands of God with a good and a humble disposition, is entitled to divine help.

We must believe that Christ and *Panaghia* protect us and help us always, as long as we are of a humble mentality. Our God is not deaf, unable to hear us, nor is He blind, unable to see us, as was Baal.[7]

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[7] Cf. 1 Kg 18:26.

Help at the Beginning of the Spiritual Struggle

– Geronda, does God help more at the beginning of the spiritual struggle?

– Yes, in the first steps of the spiritual life man receives much help from God, just as parents protect their children when they are small. As the children grow, they are not protected as much, because they begin to use their brain. At the beginning of his struggle, man is more aware of the Grace of God. Later God will allow him to struggle and mature on his own. I planted some tomatoes. At first, I watered them every day; after that, I left them for a while. When their leaves started to turn yellow, then I watered them. As long as they were not watered they were forced to send their roots deep to find moisture in the ground; it was during this same time that they produced the first green fruits. If I had watered them continuously, they would have only grown tall and their roots would have remained near the surface.

– Geronda, you said that man, at the beginning of his struggle, is more aware of God's Grace, and then for a while he is bereft of divine Grace.

– Yes, God removes His Grace, for man to be humbled and to appreciate God's help.

– Isn't this change somewhat painful?

– No, for God does not abandon man entirely. When man begins to work spiritually, then God gives him, let's say, a chocolate. He then slowly starts to learn to work spiritually, eating a little chocolate from God. But when God does not give him chocolate and he stops working spiritually, saying to himself, "At first I was eating chocolate, but now a terrible thing has happened and I have none!", he will not make any progress. In other words, man must rejoice in this and not complain. We must not seek to have Christ's help readily; let's not expect special dispensations, because then we will be untrained and unrehearsed in the spiritual life. Even in the army, those who are well trained in military tactics survive. When someone is constantly helped and assisted, in the end he is not helped.

I am personally moved by the fact that Christ does not help us constantly. I feel as though I am a student, and the professors always place demands on their students and have expectations of them. It is difficult to pass the spiritual examinations; it requires constant vigilance and effort, but then that is how we progress spiritually. Would it be difficult for God to constantly help everyone? No, but then man would not be really helped in this way. A spoiled child, whose parents constantly give him chocolates so he wants them always to be giving him, will become lazy, ill-disposed and unfortunate. Man, too, will never mature spiritually if he is constantly assisted by God without struggling himself. For this reason then, God helps man at the beginning of the spiritual life, but then gradually removes Himself in order for man to realize that he must do for himself whatever he can. Parents don't always hold a little child by the hand to help it walk; they let it walk by itself for a little and catch it just before it falls. Thus the child learns that its ability is limited to walking by holding on to the handrail. If the child only walks when held by the hand, and when they let it go it doesn't take hold of the handrail to walk and little by little become strong, but instead sits down, then it will never learn to walk, simply because it didn't do what it could.

– Is man aware that at first he had divine help and that later he doesn't?

– If man doesn't observe himself, he won't be aware of anything.

Divine Energies Are Omnipotent

– Geronda, many people are anxious about many things; what will happen with this, what will happen with that.

– Look, right now, even if God wanted to abandon us, He couldn't.

– What do you mean, Geronda?

– Well, look how parents bring a child into the world; the more they struggle to raise it, the more they love it and are attached to it. God is the same, He brought us into the world, in a way He struggled to raise us and make us what we are. Now, even if He wanted to leave us, He couldn't, because He is attached to us, as long as we continue to have a little *philotimo*. If we have a little *philotimo*, we will not lose Paradise.

– Geronda, you said that the Benevolent God will not abandon us.

– Yes, God never abandons us; we are the ones who forget and abandon Him. When man does not live spiritually, he is not entitled to divine help. But when he does live spiritually and is near God, he is entitled to it. Then, if something happens and he dies, he is ready for the other life, in which case he gains both in this life and in the next.

God's help can't be obstructed, neither by men nor demons. Nothing is difficult for God or a Saint. The obstacle for us humans is our lack of faith, which prevents the great divine energies from coming to us. And while there is such a great power next to us, we, because there is such a great amount of the human element in us, cannot understand the divine energies which exceed all of the world's human powers, because they are omnipotent.

We sit for hours on end in vain, trying by ourselves to find a solution to a problem, using all of our inexperience. Our head spins, our eyes burn, sleep escapes us, because the little demon has hooked us with obsessive thoughts. We may finally find a solution, but later God finds for us a better solution, which we had not thought of, leaving us with the headaches and the sleepless nights. No matter how right our thought might be, if God is not foremost, the head will tire and ache, while prayer with trust in God brings restfulness. For this reason, we can leave to God those activities which are difficult to achieve by human means and not be dependent upon our human efforts, reassured that He will do what is best.

For everything you think of doing, remember to say, "God willing." Don't let happen to you what happened once to someone I know. He had decided to go to his vineyard to work. He told his wife, "Tomorrow morning at first light I'm going to the vineyard." "God willing, you'll go," she told him. "God willing or not willing, tomorrow I'm going," he said again. The next day he started out before dawn. In the meantime, on the way to the vineyard there was such a deluge of rain that he was forced to return home. Dawn had not yet come. He knocked on the door. "Who is it?" asked his wife from inside. "God willing," said he, "it's your husband!"

A Good Disposition

– Geronda, what will become of the kind people who don't believe?

– You think they don't believe? Well, let's assume they don't believe. When they were little didn't their mother take them to Church for Holy Communion? But even if they didn't receive Holy Communion when little, weren't they baptized and chrismated? Aren't they born of baptized and Orthodox mothers? Well, you'll see, our Benevolent God will find a way for these kind-hearted people, either with trials and tribulations, with illnesses, hardships, with an earthquake, a lightning bolt, a deluge, or even some word, to bring them around and in the end to lead them to Paradise. Often perhaps a Saint or an Angel will appear to such people, even though they wouldn't normally be entitled to such a great blessing. But Christ can use even this approach, having first used all the others. But do you know what frequently happens to these people? The devil goes and deceives them, and many of them fall into serious error, because the devil begins to say to them, "God has shown you this miracle because you can save the world." And the poor fellow doesn't say, "Oh my God, how can I thank You? I was not at all worthy of Your blessing." Instead of feeling contrition and spiritual compunction, he accepts the deceptive thoughts of the devil and is filled with pride. After that, the devil will again visit him and set up "a television" to show him Angels and Saints and tell him again, "You will save the world." If this person

comes to his senses, the Benevolent God will again find a way to help him.

In any case, let us not forget that we all have an inheritance from God, and for this reason there is in all human beings, in the very depth of their being, a degree of goodness. But the devil pollutes everything. Now, some people have preserved this inheritance, this goodness, even if they do not live within the life of the Church. Well, God will take care of these people. So when you see a person who has been misled into living a sinful life, but who is compassionate – he sees, for example, a sick person and his heart aches, or a poor person and he helps him – you will understand from this that God will not abandon him, He will help him. And if you see someone who has distanced himself from God, a man who is hard, cruel and devoid of compassion, and so forth, then you must pray day and night for God to make "a landing" upon his heart, in order for him to make the necessary turn toward the way of salvation.

The judgments of God are an inscrutable abyss. One thing I know: those who live a worldly life because they were not helped and went astray, or were forcibly pushed into evil ways when in fact they had a good disposition, such people move God to action and God will help them. He will use various means to help them find their way; He won't abandon them. Even if it is at the time of their death, God will ensure that they are in a good spiritual state.

PART FIVE

SPIRITUAL WEAPONS

"When someone is pained over
the prevailing condition of the world today
and prays fervently,
then people can be helped
without infringement upon their free will."

CHAPTER ONE

Prayer Is a Powerful Weapon

Much Prayer Is Needed

In the past, in order to do something, a worldly person would think. If he were a spiritual person, he would think and pray. In our time, even "spiritual" people not only don't pray, they don't even think. In fact, this frequently involves serious matters, and all they do is practice on people. In all circumstances, before we act we should say, "Have I thought about this? Have I prayed about this?" When someone acts without thinking and without praying, he acts satanically. And you often see many Christians acting in a way that doesn't allow God to intervene. They imagine that they can manage everything by themselves. Whereas even an unbeliever may say an occasional "God will provide", the "believer" won't. Someone may have strong objections, for example, to the carnival and try to attack it directly, whereas he can pray and God will pour down such hail that it will scatter everyone and cancel every activity. Or, let's say, some people criticize a bishop and the others make an appeal to the Council of State. But they don't even stop there. They go on to have demonstrations, disturbances, articles in the newspapers... An endless array of human efforts that leave no room for God to act. They don't resort to prayer, for God to respond through prayer. With humility and prayer all the seemingly unsolvable problems can be corrected.

Today we live in apocalyptic times. It doesn't take a prophet to understand this. Things are moving fast. What awaits us, we don't know. That a crisis is coming is clear from the current situation. And this is one more reason why we must now rely more on prayer and fight evil with prayer. This is the only solution. We must appeal to God to have mercy on His creation – although we are unworthy of His pity. There will be no end to the problems. Everyone will do whatever comes into his head. What Saint Cosmas said will take place: *One will walk for hours to find a human being; and those who survive will be eating with golden spoons*. Of course, some think: "Since the prophecies will be fulfilled anyway, what's the use of prayer?" God sees events unfolding in this manner, but we still pray for some evil to be less harmful and to be limited in scope. That's why it is written in the Gospel that *for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.*[1] For example, in a war a miracle takes place through the power of prayer, more people are saved, there are fewer casualties, in which case people are helped spiritually, believe and are transformed in the good sense of the term.

The situation is serious. It is a miracle that the world is still here and hasn't been blown to pieces. May God put His hand upon the world and save it, for the whole world depends on three or four individuals. The fate of the world is in the hands of a few madmen. The proverb says, *The horses kick and the chickens die.* That's how it is. When the great countries fight each other, it's the small countries that suffer injustices. The large nations kick each other and the small ones are destroyed. Much, much prayer is needed to enlighten the great leaders of the world, for, if they want to, they can destroy the world. God can give them a little enlightenment very easily. If God enlightens, someone can give an order and everything changes.

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[1] Cf. Mt 24:22; Mk 13:20.

Petitions in Prayer

– Geronda, with your blessing, tell us a few things for which we should be particularly praying.

– First of all, we should beseech God that our prayer will draw those who are now living and those who will live in the future to devotion to God. In my prayer I say, *Extend your mercy on those who know Thee* and then I add, *and on those who do not know Thee*. I even say, *Lord, save the impious*. (Of course the Church has properly arranged to say, *Lord, save the pious*, for the impious may be cursing the pious for praying for them.) When again the priest says, *For those who have asked us, unworthy though we be, to pray for them*, I like to add and *for those who have not asked us to pray for them*. Because we should pray for those who ask us and for those who don't ask us, for those we know and for strangers, too. There are so many thousands of people who have greater need and more serious problems than those who have asked us to pray for them. We should also pray for those who have suffered injustices, that justice may prevail, that grace may be given to those in prison that their sufferings may be transformed into opportunities for spiritual help.

When I put wood on the fire, I praise God and say, "My God, provide warmth for those who don't have it." When again I burn the letters people send me – I read them and burn them because they contain private material and personal confessions – I say, "May God burn up all their flaws; may He help them lead a spiritual life and sanctify them." I also make it a habit to ask the Saints to protect the people who bear their name, and the Communion of Saints to protect those without a patron Saint.

– Geronda, which is better, to ask for God's mercy in general, or to refer to specific and concrete requests in accordance with *Ask, and it shall be given you.*[2]

– You should pray in general and say, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on those who are suffering in body and in spirit." This prayer includes those who have fallen asleep in the Lord. When someone you know comes to mind, say a prayer for him, *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on your servant so-and-so*, and then move on to a prayer for everyone, *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon the whole world.* You may, of course, bring to mind someone who is in need and pray a little for that person, but then you should say, *Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon us* and be pained for everyone so the train (i.e. the prayer) doesn't leave with only one passenger. We shouldn't get caught up with one person and then be unable to help either ourselves or others with our prayer. For instance, when you pray for a cancer patient, pray for all cancer patients, and

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[2] Mt 7:7.

add a prayer for all those who have already fallen asleep in the Lord. Or when you encounter some unfortunate person, let your mind and heart reach out immediately to all the unfortunate people and pray for them. As a child I remember a beggar who died outside a Turkish home, ten meters away from our home. His name was Petros. The Turkish woman found him in the morning lying outside her home and nudged him to get up; she then realized he had died. I still remember him in my prayer. How many such "Petros" are there in the world!

When we think of specific matters and see that our fellow human beings are suffering, our heart is moved, and we benefit from this. Thus, our pained heart can move from specific matters to the more general and provide greater help through prayer of the heart.

It is good for a monk to divide his prayer into three parts: for himself, for the whole world and for those who have fallen asleep in the Lord. Even though this division seems fair, nevertheless, he is still showing more care for himself, because he is only one person, whereas all the other living and departed are in the billions.

– Geronda, while rendering service to the monastery, I usually only pray for myself.

– This isn't right. When you pray for yourself in your cell and pray for yourself again outside of your cell, how can your heart be moved and stirred? When there is love, pain and sacrifice, a higher concern enters and sweetens the heart. That way no one forgets to say the Jesus Prayer while working. This way the whole world benefits, and the person who is praying also benefits and experiences spiritual joy. Do your obediences and pray, *Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on us*, so everybody may benefit. *Have* *mercy on us* covers everyone, even those five or six world leaders – however many they may be – upon whom the fate of the whole world depends. Work and pray for those who are also working. Such prayer covers those who are working physically and those who are working spiritually.

There are many who are working and they're working hard. Some are working for the good of the Church and of the State. Others are working to bring about harm; they stay awake searching for ways to destroy the world. Still others band together to find ways to prevent the previous ones from doing evil. Others again work day and night to find solutions to the general problems of the world. Pray then that God may enlighten even the evildoers to do less evil, or prevent them altogether from doing anything evil. Pray that God enlightens the good people to help the world. Pray for those who want to work but cannot because they are sick. Pray for the healthy who need work but cannot find any. Think of the various cases that may exist and pray for their solution. When the mind goes out to all of these people, the heart is stirred by the pain and suffering and then the Prayer becomes prayer of the heart. There are so many people who have a need in the course of the day. There should be no waste of time. From the person who doesn't have a great need for prayer – regardless of whether he thinks he does – one can move on to think of all those whose need is greater. Thus help comes to the one who thought he had a need, because he became the cause for the other person to pray for many.

Help Through Prayer

– Geronda, Saint James says, *The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working.*[3] What is meant by *Availeth much in its working*?

– That it is also necessary for someone seeking the prayer of a righteous man to want to be helped, to be saved, and to make an effort too. In other words, someone who wants to benefit from the prayer of a righteous man must have a good disposition. Prayer from the heart is heard; but the recipient must also be receptive. Otherwise, the person who is praying must have the sanctity of Saint Paisios the Great to be able to bring the other person out of hell.[4] So, first pray for those who wish to be saved.

When I ask God in prayer to help in various cases, I say, "My God, may Your help be obvious, so the people may benefit spiritually too; if it cannot be visible, don't help us." Many people are not at all aware what storms God has saved us from, nor do they think of it, so as to praise God. That is why we should ask Christ, *Panaghia*, the Saints to help people, but to make their help perceptible so the people can benefit spiritually from it.

Let's say someone is in danger of falling from some scaffolding and God provides that he be caught, whereas ordinarily he would not have been caught, and be saved. Or he falls somewhere and is not seriously injured. Or again he survives an accident. We should pray that this person understands that God helped and saved him and thus be helped spiritually by recognizing this fact. Someone fell from a bridge and was saved. I told him, "Did you go down to measure the depth?" It is the Saints who hold us in their hands. A young man to whom I had given a small cross to wear was speeding with his motorcycle; he passed in front of a taxi, flipped around and continued on the road, without being harmed at all. Many are spared from harm, but few are those who realize it and mend their ways.

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[3] Jas 5:16.

[4] In the life of Saint Paisios the Great the following event is related: A negligent novice fell in some sin out of disobedience and later died, before he could repent. God revealed to his Spiritual Father, after persistent prayers, that the soul of the novice will be tormented in Hades until the Day of Judgment, when he would receive the appropriate recompense. The Father then went to Hosios Paisios and asked him to pray for the salvation of his novice. After the fervent prayer of Hosios Paisios, Christ delivered the soul of the unrepentant novice from Hades.

– If I pray for someone but he doesn't ask for help, will he be helped?

– That depends on many things. First of all, if he was of good will and was not helped for some reason, we can say that he is entitled to some divine help. Even if others don't pray for him, God will later provide for him to be helped. But if he himself asks for help, God will intervene earlier and he will be helped earlier; otherwise he will be helped later. With prayer we give God the right to intervene. Normally, when a person asks for help from his heart and says humbly, "Father, pray for me too," it breaks your heart and you can't forget him. Whereas if he says flippantly, "Pray, pray, pull some beads through your fingers for me," it is like saying, "See you!". How can you remember him?

When prayer is offered from the heart, with pain, for the problems of the world, all those who are asking God for help at that time will immediately receive it. I have many concrete examples. Many years ago, a man who

was in profound despair wandered across the border, into the Iron Curtain. There, mistaking him for a spy, they seized him, tormented him and put him in prison. While in prison, he prayed. A monk known to me learned of his situation and prayed for him. "My God, I beseech You, free him. This is easy for You to do." After the imprisonment, they called him to explain himself. After this that man found himself on Greek territory. When the Greeks questioned him, he said, "They beat me, they imprisoned me, and asked me to explain myself. After that I don't remember anything. I neither know nor understand how I found myself at the guard-house on the Greek border." This is the power of prayer. Prayer moves God.

It's good for our "wireless" to work constantly, to embrace all the people who are seeking help. In the army, in the Signals Corps, we kept track of the foreign stations, but we also helped our own. We served as a transmitter for our stations that were too far away from headquarters to be heard clearly; we took their signals and transmitted them. There were always two of us working together two shifts. For if only one man was working, he would have had to interrupt and would not be able to help those seeking help, and his signals would not have reached their destination. Such a station, when working constantly, can help those whose signals don't reach their unit. By the same token, one who is bold before God and prays for others serves as an intermediary between those seeking help and God. But what happens when one asks for help and the other has his station closed down, that is, is not praying?

The Quality of Prayer Counts

– Geronda, when we have a serious request, should our prayer be accompanied by fasting?

– That goes without saying; it's a must. Fasting and ascetic struggle are prerequisites for prayer. But for prayer to be proper and effective one must have compassion for others. For it is a rule of many Christians in our time not to want to have any worries. Even retired people who sit around all day don't want to approach an abandoned child, for this requires work and effort, which will disturb their serenity. They will eat, have their coffee and take a walk; they may even go to see a patient in a hospital that has nurses and is well-organized, because this is easy. In other words, again for their own pleasure; for they ease their conscience with the thought that they have done their duty. I have pressured many people to help some poor abandoned children. My pleas have fallen on deaf ears.

Somewhere on the Holy Mountain they had a prayer service for the drought and, instead of rain, a fire broke out! A prayer service for a drought is not like going for a walk. We need to be troubled and pained over the prevailing situation. Can there be any temptation or difficult situation remaining once the monks have prayed fervently from the heart? In spite of the difficult years we are going through, I see in the monasteries a prevailing spirit ... to be happy! Here the world is burning, and we're trying to be happy. People ask us to keep a vigil, for example, to help some sick person, and we chant the festive psalm *Thou openest Thine hand, they are filled*

with good,[5] and we feel joyful. We are passing our time pleasantly, but, in the meantime, the patient is dying. And they say, "We are keeping a vigil for the sick person." What kind of vigil is that? You are entertaining yourself; that is spiritual entertainment. Sometimes, even when the priest says, *Let us pray for those who are sick*, we don't pray for the sick. We could be of more positive help to the sick if we devoted some time to the Jesus Prayer with the *komboschoini.* I am not saying, of course, that we should do away with the festive vigils prescribed by the liturgical calendar of the Church, but in such cases we can devote a little time to pray fervently one or two rounds with the *komboschoini, Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon your servant.*

The main thing is the quality of our prayer. Prayer must be from the heart; it must be said with pain and compassion. What counts more for God is not the quantity of prayer but the quality. The prayer practised in the monasteries has quantity, but this is not enough; it must also have quality. So many hours of prayer by so many people, if it were prayer of the heart, would have changed the world. For this reason, the goal should be for the Services to be so celebrated that they are prayer of the heart. Prayer of the heart not only helps others but also ourselves, because it helps us to acquire inner goodness. When we put ourselves in others' shoes, love then comes naturally, as does compassion, humility, and our gratitude to God with continuous praise, and then prayer for our fellow human beings is acceptable to God and helpful to them.

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[5] Ps 104:28 (Ps 103:28 LXX).

"But They Constrained Him"[6]

– Geronda, my heart remains cold during prayer.

– This is because the mind doesn't send a telegram to the heart. After all, one must do a great deal of work in prayer; one cannot attain from one moment to the next a steadfast condition of prayer, so that the mind doesn't wander at all. Patience is needed. You see, someone knocks on the door, knocks again, waits, and then the door opens. You seem to want to knock once and enter directly. It doesn't work this way. When you begin to say the Jesus Prayer, don't you have a desire for it?

– I feel the need for help, because I feel weak.

– Well, that's where one starts from. In prayer, we must be persistent. The Evangelist says, *But they constrained him*, about the two disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus.[7] Christ remained with them, because they had a relationship with Him, and they were entitled. They had humility, simplicity, goodness and even boldness, in the good sense, all the prerequisites, and for this reason Christ stayed with them.

We must pray with faith for every matter and we must have patience, and God will speak. Because when man prays with faith, God is in a sense obligated by virtue of our faith to fulfil our request. For this reason, when we ask for something from God, let us never be in doubt and we shall be heard. The Lord said, *Have faith and doubt not*.[8] God knows when to give us what we ask for, so we won't be harmed spiritually. Sometimes we ask God for something, but we have no patience and are troubled. But, since we have an Almighty God Who has so much love that He nurtures us with His Body and Blood, we have no business being troubled. Sometimes we don't leave a matter in God's hands but instead try to deal with it in a human way. When we ask God for something but have doubts and act by human means to achieve what is really difficult, without waiting for God's answer to our request, it is like making a petition to God, our King, and then withdrawing it just as He stretches out His hand to act on our behalf. We beseech Him again, but again we doubt and are troubled and repeat the same thing. Thus, we are tormented continuously. We behave like the person who petitions the Ministry, and, after a while, changes his mind and withdraws his petition. He changes his mind again and resubmits it; after a while, he again withdraws it. The petition, however, has to stand in order to wait its turn.

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[6] Lk 24:29.

[7] Cf. Lk 24:13-32.

[8] Cf. Mt 21:21.

Prayer With Pain

– Geronda, how do you pray about a certain matter?

– The main thing is to feel compassion. If one is not compassionate, he may sit for hours with the *komboschoini*, and his prayer will have no result whatsoever. If there is pain in his heart about what he is praying for, even with a single sigh he will have prayed from the heart. Many, who when asked to pray have no time, will sigh for the other's problem and that in itself is a prayer. I'm not saying prayer needn't be done, but, if there is no time, a sigh for the pain of another is a prayer from the heart; it equals hours of prayer. You read, for example, a letter, you realize there is a problem, you sigh over it and then you pray. This is very important. Before you even pick up the telephone receiver, even before you call, God hears you! And how the other person learns of this! You should see how those possessed by demons realize when I am praying for them, and cry out wherever they may be.

Real prayer begins from pain; it is not a pleasant experience, a "nirvana". What kind of pain is it? One is troubled in the good sense of the term. He feels pain, he groans, he suffers when praying for anything whatsoever. Do you know what it means to suffer? Yes, he suffers, because he is participating in everyone's pain or in the pain of one particular person. This participation, this pain, is rewarded by God with divine exultation. Of course, he doesn't ask for this exultation, but it comes as a consequence, because he participates in the pain of others.

– How will he begin?

– Let's say he learns of an accident and sighs, and, at that moment, God gives him divine consolation for his compassionate sigh. He sees someone who is hurting, and immediately feels compassion, and is thus consoled by God with divine consolation; he doesn't remain with that initial bitterness over the accident. The other person is helped through his prayer. Or he may think to himself, "God has given us so many blessings; what have I done for God?" I was impressed by what one soul said to me, "The Angels cover their faces when the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist is being celebrated, while we commune with the Body and Blood of Christ. What have I done for Christ?" He suffers in a good sense.

– Geronda, how does one understand that someone has been helped by his prayer?

– He realizes it from the divine consolation which he feels inside after praying from the heart in pain. But first, you must make the other person's pain your own and then pray from the heart. Love is a divine attribute and informs the other person. Even in hospitals, when the doctors and nurses feel genuine compassion for their patients, this is the most effective medicine of all the medications given to them. The patients feel they are being cared for with love and have a sense of certainty, security, and consolation. You don't need to say much to someone who is suffering or try to instruct him. He understands that you feel his pain and care about him, and he is helped by this. Feeling his pain is everything. If we feel compassion for others, we forget ourselves and our problems.

Divine Consolation

– Geronda, when I feel pain for others, I become anxious and cannot pray.

– This anxiety shows that there is a human element in you. The more I am pained by people's sufferings, the more I pray and rejoice spiritually at telling Christ everything and having Him take care of it. And I notice that as time passes and physical courage diminishes, spiritual courage increases because love, sacrifice, and compassion for others provide great spiritual strength. And I must admit that this evening during your vigil,[9] I wasn't really up to it, but I received renewed strength from the pain of others. And I was able to stand through the night until the Divine Liturgy by seeing all the people. Even later, standing in the Church, I didn't feel tired because I felt compassion for those people and this strengthened me. You, too, must pray and rejoice, because Christ will take care of everything.

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[9] The Elder is referring to the vigil of the 9th to the 10th of November 1993. In spite of his great suffering from cancer, he stood, holding on to a chair, and gave his blessing to approximately thirty thousand people who passed by that day.

There is no grief in the spiritual encounter. With those people now I went through so much pain! I didn't pass over their problems lightly. I was pained by them, I sighed over them, but with every sigh I turned the matter over to God and in the pain I felt for the other person God provided consolation. That is to say, divine consolation came with the spiritual approach, because the pain which carries with it hope in God also has divine consolation. Otherwise how is one to endure! How could I possibly get through all the things that I hear? Yes, I feel the pain, but I also think of the divine reward in those who are suffering. We are in God's hands. Since there is divine justice, divine reward, nothing is lost. The more one is tormented, the more he will be rewarded. Although God sees so much suffering upon the earth, even things which we cannot imagine, He never falters. "You have suffered more?" He asks, "I will provide you with more in the other life", and He rejoices. Otherwise, how could He endure so much injustice, so much evil that exists? But He keeps in mind the reward of those who suffer and, in a manner of speaking, endures that great pain. We don't see the glory to be received by the other person and so we feel compassion for him, and for this God rewards us with divine consolation.

– Geronda, won't this worry exhaust us?

– No. Someone who faces every problem spiritually is not exhausted. At first, he is grieved, embittered, when he hears that someone is suffering, but then divine consolation comes as a reward and the human organism is not destroyed. While bitterness from worldly worry brings gastro-intestinal illnesses, and so on, spiritual compassion does not harm our organism because it has the divine balsam.

The Danger of Insensitivity

– Geronda, sometimes, lay people ask me to pray for some problem they have. I do it, but without feeling any pain for them.

– Here there are two cases: the first is dangerous, the second has a spiritual resolution. When the monk forgets his family and doesn't think of others either, that is, doesn't pray for the world, this is very bad. We come to the monastery, we abandon our family, and we end up forgetting not only our family but even more so the others. We see things spiritually, but we don't share in others' pain spiritually. We don't make spiritual progress, to be able to feel their problems, and there is a danger of becoming insensitive. Indifference creeps in and the heart becomes like stone. In the second case one feels pain for everyone, but also finds consolation in knowing that the sufferer will have a reward from God for being a martyr. With this thought, one feels a deep certainty and has an inner joy. In this case the heart isn't stony, but divine.

If monks and nuns aren't careful, their hearts can become very hard. Lay people see accidents, the suffering of others, and are pained. We don't see this suffering and may pray only for ourselves. That is, if we don't work on ourselves to learn to feel the misfortunes of others, so that we will be able to pray for them from the heart, we may become hard-hearted. We may reach the point of wanting to make ourselves comfortable and having a heart stony from indifference, a condition that is contrary to the Gospel. The monk must care for, be pained over, and in general pray for the people. This is not a distraction, but, on the contrary, he himself is helped by the prayer and so are the others.

– Geronda, while I see my own many faults, I pray more for others. Would it perhaps be better not to pray for others and to pray only for myself?

– Out of humility? If, indeed, it is out of humility, then very humbly say to God, "My God, wretch that I am, I am unworthy to be heard by You. But is it fair for others to suffer because of me? For, if I had a good spiritual state, an authentic boldness before You, You would have listened to my prayer and helped them. I, too, am to blame for the sufferings of others. But now why should they suffer because of me? Please help them." In other words, it depends on how you see yourself with regard to other people. You feel unworthy, but it happens that you see someone who is suffering, and so you worry about them, you are pained and you pray.

When, for example, I see a blind man, I feel guilty because, if I was in a proper spiritual state, I would be able to heal him. God has given us the potential to become saints, to do miracles, as He Himself did. We acknowledge our great or small spiritual illness and humbly ask for the physical health of our fellow human being, as being responsible for his illness. For if we had spiritual health, he would have been healed long ago and not suffered.

When we realize that we are responsible for the condition of all the people and say, *Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us*, everyone benefits. We should grieve over our own many faults, but also seek God's mercy. Naturally, when one reaches a good spiritual state, he doesn't ask anything for himself.

I see that we often take the Jesus Prayer the wrong way by saying, *Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me* and, presumably out of humility, avoid saying, *Have mercy on us*, thus not praying for others, but only for ourselves. This is one reason why lay people sometimes misunderstand us monks and say that we are egotists who only seek to save ourselves. We use the singular, *Have mercy on me* to avoid falling into pride. The prayer of a humble person, who believes himself to be the worst of all, is of greater worth than an all-night vigil done by a proud person. When we pray with pride, we are fooling ourselves.

A State of Alert

Do not forget that we are going through difficult times and much prayer is needed. You must remember the great need people have for prayer today, and the great expectation God has of us to pray. Pray for the general outrageous condition of the whole world that Christ may have pity on His creations, for they are heading for destruction. Pray for His divine intervention in our outrageous time, for the people are heading into a general confusion, into madness and an impasse.

God has called us to pray for the people, who have so many problems. The poor people don't even have time to cross themselves. If we who are monks and nuns don't pray, then who will? The soldier in wartime is on alert, always ready with his shoes on. The monk must also be on alert. How I would have loved to be a Maccabee,[10] to withdraw to the mountains and pray constantly for the world.

We must help everyone with our prayer and not let the devil have his way with them. The devil has acquired rights. Not because God has given him permission, but because He doesn't want to violate man's free will. This is why we can help through prayer. When one is pained over the prevailing condition of the world and prays, then people can be helped, without violating free will. If you continue with the Grace of God a little further, we can begin to make some progress on the issue of prayer, to put into effect a certain order, to be a radar station of prayer, for the urgency of the times requires it. We must organize a prayer taskforce. You must wage war with the *komboschoini*. Pray with pain in your heart for the world. Do you know what great power such prayer has?

I am deeply hurt to see monks who act in human ways and not with prayer through God in matters which are difficult to achieve by human means. God can put everything in order. When one does good spiritual work, then, through prayer alone, one can build monasteries, equip them with all the necessary things and help the whole world. There is no need to even work, as long as one

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[10] The name Maccabees was given to Judah, leader of the Jewish rebellion of 166 BC against Antiochos IV Epiphanes, ruler of the kingdom of Seleucids. The title, according to the more probable opinion, refers to the one who hammered the enemy. The same name was given also to the successors of Judah. The Maccabees distinguished themselves in the struggles for the traditional faith and for political freedom of the Jewish people. (See 1, 2 and 3 Maccabees.)

prays. A monk must try not to worry over every little difficulty, whether it is personal or affects a fellow human being, or even the general state of society, but should instead resort to prayer and send, through God, many divine powers. After all, a monk's work is precisely the work of prayer, and if any monk has not realized this, his life is without meaning. For this reason, he must know that every worry which urges him to seek human solutions to various problems, with suffering and headaches, is a result of demonic temptation. When you see yourselves worrying about matters which have no human solution, and you don't put them in God's hands, you must understand that this is a machination of the devil, to distract you from prayer, with which God can send not only divine power but many divine powers, and this divine help will then be not simply divine help but a miracle from God. From the moment we begin to be troubled and anxious, we prevent God from intervening. We tend to put our reasoning first rather than God, the divine will, so that we may deserve divine help. The devil tries, by craftily misdirecting a monk's love, to limit him to a worldly love, to a human way of helping his fellow human beings, whereas the monk can move in his own space, in his own field, which is to be a wireless operator of prayer, the unique service God has given him to do. All the other things a monk may do through his human efforts are of secondary importance.

Also it is better for the monk to help others with his prayer than with his words. If he does not have the power to keep someone from doing evil, then he should help him from afar through prayer, otherwise he may himself be harmed. A prayer from the heart has more power than a thousand words, especially for someone who won't listen. Even though people say that I help those who come here to see me, I consider my true help to people to be my reading of the Psalms for an hour and a half each day. I view all else as entertainment; people come and tell me their problems and I give them some advice, some spiritual counsel. As such, any help they may receive is not from me, for it is the prayer that really helps. If I could devote all my time to prayer, I think I would be helping people more. Let's say I see two hundred suffering people a day; are there only two hundred people suffering in the world? If I see no one and spend all day praying for the whole world, then I see everyone. This is why I tell people, "I prefer to talk to God about you, rather than to talk to you about God. This is better for you, but you don't understand me."

In these difficult years let us not neglect the work of prayer. Prayer is security; it is communication with God. Did you see what Abba Isaac says? God will not ask us why we did not pray, but why we did not have a relationship with Christ and allowed the devil to torment us.[11]

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[11] See Saint Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies*, Homily 32, p. 151. *On that day, God will not judge us about psalmody, nor for the neglect of prayer, but because by abandoning them, we have opened our door to the demons.*

CHAPTER TWO

Monasteries Are the Fortresses of the Church[1]

The Monk Is a Beacon of Light Upon the Rocks

Geronda, what is the work of a monk?

– The work of a monk is to become a vessel of the Holy Spirit. A monk must make his heart as sensitive as the gold leaf used by iconographers. The entire work of the monk is love, just as he became a monk out of love for God, which includes love for one's neighbour. The monk meditates upon the sufferings of society, his heart is pained and he prays from the heart constantly for all the people. Thus he helps the world through his prayer. There are monks who help the people more than the whole world together could help them. For example, a worldly person may give a couple of oranges or a kilo of rice to some poor person, often just to be seen by others, while all along criticising others for not helping. But a monk can silently offer tons of help through his prayer.

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[1] Special volumes will appear on Monasticism and Prayer in the future. Included in this volume about these two themes is only what is related to the subject of spiritual awakening.

A monk doesn't make his own, worldly plans for missionary work, but proceeds without any plan of his own, and the Benevolent God takes him into His own divine plan and, in His divine way, He will send him to do missionary work if needed. God doesn't ask monks to go out into the world to hold people's hands and help them walk; He asks them by their life to provide a light to guide people to eternal life. In other words, the monk's mission is not to help people by being in the world. A monk flees far from the world, not because he hates people but because he loves them, and only by living far from the world will he be able to help them with his prayer in whatever cannot be done by human means but only through divine intervention. This is why a monk must be in constant communion with God, to receive messages and to show people the way to God.

I couldn't understand how the Roman Catholics justify certain things. My query was answered a few years ago when two Roman Catholic architects from Rome came by my *Kalyvi*. They were ignorant, but meant well. They asked me, "What are the monks doing by staying here? Why don't they go out into the world to do social work?" I said, "Aren't beacons always set upon rocky heights? Why should they go to the cities and be added to the streetlights? Lighthouses have one mission and streetlights have another." The monk is not a small streetlight to be put in the city at the side of the street to light pedestrians so they don't stumble. A monk is an isolated beacon, positioned high on the crags of a rocky shore, to provide light and direction for those upon the seas and the oceans, so that they may guide their ships to reach their destination, to reach God.

The Quiet Preaching of the Monk

I will pray that you three novices don't grow up, but remain as you are now with those blue headscarves, at that height and that age. Do you realize how people are quietly helped when they see you? For in the world today people can't easily find a proper young girl. Most are wild, with a cigarette in their hand, making unpleasant grimaces. And when people see here young girls dedicated, chanting, joyful, they ask themselves, "What's happening here? Something's going on. We can't say they're stupid, because they aren't. We can't say they're missing something, because they aren't. It's clear there's something higher here." Indeed, do you know how much this helps?

When worldly people visit a monastery and see proper monks, then even if they are unbelievers, if they are well-disposed, they can become believers. Many atheist scientists, who came to the Holy Mountain just for a visit, have changed their way of life. They are troubled, in the good sense, by what they see and hear, and are helped. They see young men, who are joyful, who had every opportunity to succeed in the world, but who have abandoned wealth, position, and so forth, to live ascetically, with prayer and vigils, and they ask themselves, "What is going on here? If indeed God exists, if there is another life, if there is a hell, what am I doing with my life?" So they rein in their sinful way of life, or correct it altogether. I know of one case. A young woman of twenty attempted suicide by cutting her veins, but was saved in time. After that, a monk took her to a monastery. The poor thing was wild. But when she saw the nuns there, she quickly recovered.

"I see another world here," she said, and asked, "May I stay here?"

This is the silent preaching of the monks. Many preach, but few inspire confidence in what they say, because they don't practice what they preach. A monk doesn't deliver sermons out loud to be heard by others, but preaches Christ silently with his life and helps with his prayer. He lives the Gospel, and the Grace of God gives him away. Thus the Gospel is preached in the most effective way, something which people thirst to see and hear, especially today. And when the monk speaks, he doesn't simply offer a thought; he speaks from his experience. But even if he does express a thought, even this is enlightened.

– Geronda, some people say that young men and women enter a monastery because they are disillusioned or have some disability, or even because they are weak in the head.

– It seems that these people have one or two such cases in mind and then go on unfairly, out of spite or envy, to malign ninety per cent of the monks. But if they look closely, they see that this is not the case, and they will admit that there is indeed something higher here, that God does indeed exist.

This is why a monk must always set a good example for other people, *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*[2] A true monk is the light of the world. What does Saint John Climacus say? *The Angels serve as light to the monks, and the monks serve as light to the people of the world.*[3] When the monk can be distinguished from the people of the world, then he can have a positive effect upon them. What helps the people in the world, who are suffering over vain things, is holiness, which, through its simplicity, teaches them to grasp the deeper meaning of life and dispel the heaviness in their heart.

The Monk and the Renewal of the World

Monks are Christ's regular army, and that's why they're not paid. You see how many people who come to visit the Holy Mountain can never forget it. Wherever else they go, people will ask them for money, and so on, while on the Holy Mountain all they have to do is present their visitor's permit and after that they can go anywhere they wish without paying anything. They will eat free, they will sleep free. They find something different and are helped spiritually. When I was at the *Kalyvi* of the Precious Cross,[4] someone came who had many problems. We spoke for an hour and a half. Then he took out a five hundred drachma note. "What's that?" I asked him. "For a simple visit to the doctor we pay at least this much," he told me. "Please forgive me, is it perhaps not enough?"

Some European Community officials, who came to the Holy Mountain after the last fire to assess the situation and see how they could help, came by the *Kalyvi*. In our conversation I told them, "We came here to give, not to receive." "This is the first time we have heard this," they told me and made a note of it immediately.[5] We didn't become monks to receive material goods; we became monks to be able to give spiritual things, without any material benefit. To be free of worldly cares so we can devote all of our time to our spiritual responsibilities. We left the world and went into the ascetic life for the love of Christ, to liberate ourselves from the passions and to liberate others as well.

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[2] Mt 5:16.

[3] See John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 26:23, p. 128.

[4] The Elder lived at the *Kalyvi* of the Precious Cross during the years 1969-1978.

Our goal is to help people with our prayer and through our example, so that they may experience a spiritual rebirth. When someone leaves the world and enters the monastery, he or she becomes a spiritual Father or a spiritual Mother. When a young woman becomes a nun, she is "married"; she becomes a bride of Christ, a spiritual Mother, and helps people to be spiritually reborn. For example, with her prayer she helps in the creation of good Christian families. But besides prayer, in certain circumstances she must also offer assistance to people on the human level. Every good nun, besides the prayer she offers for people, provides great help with her manner, with the right approach, with a few words of spiritual guidance she speaks to a pilgrim, to help him grasp the deeper meaning of life, or to a mother to encourage her. But for a nun to want to communicate with the world is useless, because such social contacts conflict with the spiritual laws and as a result we suffer. As much as you can, seek to be active in obscurity. I make a comparison and it pains me: Some monks enjoy going to festivals, visits and having spiritual friendships. When I'm forced to go somewhere for spiritual work, I feel as if I am going to be tormented, and I see it as a waste of time.

– Geronda, when a nun is mature in years but immature spiritually, what is at fault?

– She doesn't examine herself carefully and doesn't do the necessary spiritual work. The problem begins from there. Let us assume that Christ didn't call someone to become a nun, and she stayed in the world and became a mother. Then she wouldn't have demands of others, but others would have demands of her. She would have given much and would have received much with the sacrifice she would have made. In the monastery, she must become a spiritual Mother; her mission is higher than a mother's. But now what happens? She enters the monastery at a young age and, if she doesn't make proper spiritual progress, continues to think of herself as a child. But she must realize that she isn't a child who thinks, "We have our mother, we have our home, we are carefree, and I don't have a care in the world." She must give of herself and assist in the younger Sisters' spiritual rebirth through her behaviour, or help the pilgrims who come to the monastery, and sacrifice herself in everything, and she shall receive without asking. If a nun doesn't offer herself in this manner, everything is lost. She remains in an undeveloped state and wants constantly to take from both the young and the old, without giving of herself. She cultivates a sickly spirit and doesn't mature, because she doesn't offer herself to others.

I see in some monks precisely the condition of a Bedouin whom I had known at Mount Sinai. He was sixty-five years old and said, "I, too, have no father; I am an orphan." At sixty-five, people have grandchildren. Two and three generations have passed and he still says, "I, too, have no father," and is still seeking a father's love. We monks, if we are not careful, can remain children, and this is bad. But if the nun or monk thinks what she or he would be doing in the world at her age, she could say, "Now I shouldn't be looking for human consolation; I must sacrifice myself and not make demands on others." Most of them come to the monastery at a young age, find spiritual parents, and may remain in a childish condition, with childish requests, whereas if they had stayed in the world, they would have become parents. In other words, they remain forever children, not in the good sense but in the immature sense. They will grow old, but unless they exercise their mind, they may, for example, get excited over a piece of candy or a piece of clothing. There was an elderly monk on the Holy Mountain who used to say, "My Spiritual Father got me a woollen sweater," and would show the sweater given to him by his Elder. He was as excited as a small child whose mother has bought him a braided jacket!

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[5] These words were spoken in May 1991.

We must be children in our innocence, but not in our way of thinking.[6] For otherwise, how will bravery enter into our life? How are we to acquire a manly and mature spirit? A monk, in order to progress spiritually, must soften his hard heart, and try to make it like a mother's heart. Even a nun, in order to make spiritual progress, must acquire a little manliness.

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[6] Cf. 1 Cor 14:20.

Spiritual Modesty Transforms Others

– Geronda, how can someone who enters a monastery discard the worldly state of mind, the worldly air that he still has?

– When he enters the monastery, he must forget the world, and then must not forget that he is in a monastery. At home perhaps he wasn't helped, wasn't brought up properly; but now it is important what kind of spiritual education he receives here in the monastery. Of course, it will be a monastic education. The monastery is a sacred place. The outside world is something else. When someone is aware of being in a sacred place, modesty and restraint come by themselves. But if one forgets and imagines oneself in the world, while in the monastery, how then can modesty be cultivated? A nun must move about in a natural manner, with simplicity, with humility, and not try to look wretched. Such behaviour is repulsive and disgusting.

In some novice Sisters who walk with an air of confident pride, I see something worldly. They walk like brides in the world, not brides of Christ. Whereas, I observe something sacred in those who walk with a modest gait. What a difference between the one and the other! One can immediately understand what Monasticism is. If you observe the wheat stalks, you will notice that the ones which are standing tall and upright have nothing inside. Whereas the wheat stalks which are mature and ripe are bending downward.

A devout monk can transform others who look upon him. Just today a priest monk came whom I have known for many years. Even though he is not particularly handsome, that is, he does not have an external beauty, every time he received Holy Communion, I saw him glow. But even when he was not receiving Holy Communion, I detected a light, a spiritual gleam in his face. Just as the asphalt on the roads can be seen with a gleaming shine from a distance in the summer, even though it is tar, so in this case one can see brightness in someone who is not handsome. (This, of course, is not a very good example, but what can one put forward as an example?) The spiritual condition of his inner being endows him with an external glow. This is spiritual beauty, grace, divine Grace. In contrast, other clerics who are externally handsome, but who have a worldly spirit and move about with an air of worldly pride, are so repulsive! You see someone who is entirely secular. Apart from his ordination as a clergyman, there is nothing else spiritual to see. A person's face mirrors his soul. This is what Christ said, *The light of the body is the eye. If therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.*[7] If someone has simplicity, humility, there is divine enlightenment, and he shines. Now, this is what a monk must achieve.

– Geronda, Saint Neilos the Kalavros says that from the moment someone is tonsured to be a monk, he will become either an angel or a devil.[8] Does this mean that there is nothing in between?

– What he means is that a monastic person must seek to do the very best possible work in his calling. This is why when a monk of the Great Habit falls into mortal

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[7] Mt 6:22.

[8] See *Saint Neilos the Kalavros*, ed. Holy Metochion of the Annunciation of the Theotokos, Ormylia 1991, p. 252.

sin, God allows a rod to fall upon him for the purpose of expiation. Sometimes we imagine that Grace can be obtained by external means, in an artificial or magical manner. But this way neither God nor the person himself is at ease, and others are also not put at ease by such superficial spirituality. Some monks, for example, make broad and long Great Habits reaching down to their feet, with red crosses, roses, red branches and many letters... And they open their cassock to reveal the Habit, like the Pharisees who *make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments*,[9] to show that they pray a lot! But in the past one could barely see the Habit under the cassock of a monk as he walked. In fact, many wore a small Habit underneath to hide it altogether. Now we have vain and empty things. Is this how they will receive Grace from the Habit? The Habit abhors them and Grace departs. The goal is to become a monk of the Great Habit from within. And anyone who is a monk of the Great Habit from within will hide his external Habit. An external object does not bring about the inner transformation. Thus, man remains on the external plane, and in the end Christ will tell us, *I know you not.*[10]

The Monasteries' Goal Is a Spiritual One

A monk is interested in his own salvation and in the salvation of all the living and departed. For a monk the real, divine love is to be found in the pain endured for the salvation of his soul, and in the pain endured for the salvation of all the people in the world. The dedicated soul of a monk contributes to the salvation not only of his family members, but also of his compatriots. This is why there was a good tradition in Asia Minor to have at least one monk from every group of kinsmen in order to have him intercede for all the others. In Pharasa, when someone became a monk, the entire town would celebrate and say, "He will be of great help to our town as well."

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[9] Mt 23:5.

[10] Mt 25:12.

A monk, of course, would never say "I want to save the world," but he will surely pray for the salvation of all the people in the world together with his own salvation. And when the Benevolent God hears his prayer and indeed helps the people, the monk again would not say "I saved the people," but rather "God saved the people." The monk must attain the spiritual state where he will be able to say, "My God, do not look at me, do not have mercy on me, but look and have mercy on the people of the world." And he can say this not because he has no need of God's mercy, but because he has so much love for other people.

– Geronda, to what extent should a monk abandon himself in order to help the people?

– To the extent that he can see people benefiting. If I abandon myself entirely into the hands of worldly people, I, too, will become worldly. When a monk does things presumably to help worldly people, which, however, are not appropriate in Monasticism, then the worldly people will not benefit. A monk can, for example, be an excellent taxi driver, not charging his customers and teaching them spiritual things, but this is not monasticism. Sometimes one can find monks who have a worldly spirit, and laypersons who have a monastic spirit. This is why in the

other life Christ will say to some, "You take off that Monastic Habit, and you put it on..." The layperson who desires the life of the monk is sanctified, while the monk who desires the worldly life will be tormented.

– Can someone understand if he is not properly positioned in his calling?

– Even if he doesn't understand, if there is something wrong, he will not have complete peace and serenity in his soul. His soul will not find peace in whatever is not appropriate to Monasticism. And from the moment his soul does not find peace, he must seek to find out what is wrong.

Someone I knew went to a monastery and then came to tell me, "There is light manufacturing going on there; and the abbess is good for Monasteraki[11] in Athens, where she will be a great salesperson of buttons!" In other words, the monastery had become a shop of light manufacturing; after that, it becomes a manufacturing unit, then a supermarket and then a hypermarket! The poor lay people expect something higher from us monks and, to reach this higher spiritual state, we must avoid every human consolation.

The goal of the monasteries is a spiritual one and no worldly element should exist there, only a heavenly one where the souls can be inundated with heavenly delights. In worldly matters we cannot compete with the people of the world, for they have more abundant means. Do you know how a monastery living a thoroughly spiritual life can positively affect people in the world? When there is devotion, fear of God, and neither worldly rationalism nor a commercial spirit, this is what moves and inspires lay people. But unfortunately the commercial spirit is gradually entering into the very marrow of Monasticism.

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[11] A neighbourhood in Athens known for its commercialism.

A monk had come to my *Kalyvi* while I was weaving a *komboschoini.* "You give away the prayer *komboschoinia* as a blessing to your visitors, but I can sell that *komboschoini* of thirty-three knots that you're making for five hundred drachmas. And I don't make it like you do. As soon as I finish the knots, I cut it and sew it a little so I don't lose the threads. I even use the threads which I cut from the cross, I connect them without using any beads, and this way I make more profit." "You should be ashamed of yourself," I told him. "Don't you realize that you are possessed by a commercial spirit? I've been a monk since 1950 and this is the first time I've seen such an attitude!"

– Geronda, few people are so truly mature spiritually that they can help others!

– Yes, sadly there are so few! No wonder people go astray! Do you know how much I pray for God to present to the world true and authentic Christians who will be able to help people? It's enough for the people if you feel for them a little and don't exploit them; they don't ask for anything more than that. In the world, they are constantly at war and feel insecure. When they go to a properly functioning monastery, they benefit, for they feel secure and this gives them consolation and encouragement to continue their struggle.

In these difficult times people don't lack material food so much as they do spiritual food. People don't lack bread – even though this, too, is needed in many parts of the world and will soon be more difficult to obtain –, they need spiritual help. We must concentrate on helping the whole world with our prayer. Let us, for example, help prevent a family from breaking up, or help a mother to raise her poor children properly. Let us try to support the devoted ones.

A Spiritual State Is a Spiritual Fortress

Today is the time for souls to be prepared, for if something were to happen, I don't know what lies ahead. May God prevent difficult days from coming, but if they do come, with a slight earthquake, a shake-up, whole brotherhoods, entire monasteries, will come crashing down, because each one will try to save himself and go his own way.

Much attention is needed for God not to abandon us. Your souls must have something spiritual in them. This is what makes you honourable. There will come a great shaking. I have told you so much, I have spoken so sternly! If I had been so forewarned I would be troubled over it, I would ask why I was told such things and what must be done. For one thing, I wouldn't sleep over this for at least one night, if not for many nights. If I didn't see the difficult years ahead, I wouldn't be so troubled. But what I see is that later you will be greatly troubled. You may not understand me now, but you will understand me later.

– Geronda, what is someone to do if he is alone during difficult years?

– Start now by first of all being obedient, acquiring discernment, and then we'll see. This is why we must first get rid of our faults. If one has faults, he will not be able to get through the difficult times. If now he complains about everything and considers himself to be a heroic person, while all the others are in a terrible spiritual state, imagine then... Make sure you correct yourselves now so you will be entitled to divine help. Put your trust more into God and find your support in Him. We will have more difficult years. The fruits ... are still unripe; they haven't ripened yet. When you become spiritually mature, do you know what you will be? A fortress. Not only for here, but you will be helpful to others further away. Otherwise, you too will need human help and protection. And have you any idea how bad it is for a monastery, with so many Sisters, to be in need of laypersons?

Today, as always, a monk must live spiritually in order to be able to overcome a difficulty. He must be prepared, and not worry over deprivations, because then he may end up betraying Christ. A time will come when all the rivers will dry up, everyone will be thirsty, everyone will suffer. For us monks this is not so terrible a thing; for if we are thirsty, we should be thirsty, having voluntarily accepted to endure hardships. And I will say, "Whatever I didn't do voluntarily as a monk, I now do involuntarily in order to understand what it means to be a monk. Thanks be to God!" But what about the poor people! When people reach the point of inventing bombs which kill people and spare the buildings, what can I say? Christ said, *One soul is worth as much as the whole world,*[12] and yet they value buildings more than all the people; this is horrible!

– Geronda, I am afraid of what awaits us.

– Such fear helps us to hold on to Christ. Not, of course, that one should rejoice over what awaits us, but at least one can rejoice at the chance to struggle for Christ. In other words, we may not go through an occupation like that of Hitler or Mussolini, but we will be tested for Christ. We won't win by having machine guns or atomic bombs; this will be a spiritual war. We will do battle with the devil himself. But the devil has no authority over us that we ourselves don't hand over to him. What then should we fear? It would be different if indeed the enemy were a Hitler or a Mussolini. But now let no fear be in you. In fact, rejoice that the battle is a spiritual one.

If you live monastically, patristically, and are spiritually vigilant, you will be entitled to divine intervention in every attack of the enemy. If there are people of prayer, humble people, who have pain and love in their heart, they will serve as spiritual "capital" and be spiritual "bases". When two or three souls exist in a monastery who think of the pain of others and who pray, this is a spiritual fortress that can keep all enemies at bay.

Prayer, Proper Living, Example

– Geronda, what is the proper position for a monk to take in today's difficult circumstances?

– First of all there must be prayer, proper living, setting a good example, and whenever and wherever needed, speaking out.

– Do you mean that a monk must speak out when the situation requires it?

– But of course, if a monk doesn't speak out, who will? A monk has nothing to fear. The others are afraid of being removed from their positions. Those of us who are dedicated to God must lead the way, otherwise who will?

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[12] Cf. Mt 16:26.

My thought tells me that God will not allow it; He will not allow it! This present situation will be cleared up. For now it seems there is a large net which contains fish but which is rotten. It goes this way and that way but in the end it will break. And it won't break because the fish are large, but because the net is rotten.

– Geronda, are the fish the Christians?

– Yes, and the others are the eels, the snakes. But we, too, will be accountable to God for this situation. I am now speaking openly; I cannot contain myself any more.

– Geronda, what then are we supposed to do?

– First of all, we must work on ourselves. For as a monk my goal is to dissolve my own human spirit, to correct myself first, to become a truly spiritual person, for otherwise my life as a monk has no meaning. Then we must speak out when needed, and God will help to bring about positive results.

– Geronda, some people say it is better to keep silent and pray.

– You can't be indifferent when everything is burning around you. You must put out the fire. The pain won't let you keep silent. Of course, the most important thing is to try to live a spiritual life as far as possible. And, if it becomes necessary to take a certain position on an important issue, a monk will take the position which God permits.

Live humbly, simply and spiritually, so that at a difficult moment you will not be obliged to make compromises. Next make sure that young women will come to become nuns who have the necessary prerequisites for Monasticism, so they can become true and authentic nuns.

When someone becomes a true monk, then he knows how far he should concern himself with a particular issue. He will know what to do and what not to do, and how he should act. If he doesn't become a true monk, then everything goes wrong. Do you understand this? If you become true nuns, you will act with prudence. But if you don't become true nuns, and you send one of your number out into the world, you must instruct her in detail to say this up to this point, say that up to that point, for otherwise she may say foolish things. This, of course, is a condition of one who is underdeveloped. How then can one get through difficult situations?

For this reason those who have the necessary prerequisites for Monasticism should be cultivated and developed to become true nuns, so they know how far to go and what to say or not say; so they know what to do in a difficult situation. And they will function within the boundaries of obedience, for their spirit will agree with the spirit of the Abbess. At a critical moment, the Abbess will make one simple gesture, and the nuns will understand, because they are working on the same wavelength. Otherwise, you cannot have a spiritual community. If you don't learn to work this way, someone else may break into the same frequency, saying different things and doing great harm, without you realizing it.

Monasticism Is in Danger

The world today is burning and Monasticism is weakening, unravelling, losing its value. If the spirituality of Monasticism goes, nothing remains. On the Holy Mountain, a pilgrim said to a monk, "Is there no spirit of asceticism here?" The monk replied, "This is now a new period in our history; those things are gone!" You may say that this was just one fool. There may be another five or ten such fools; but if they say such silly things, they should be locked up in the Monastery tower! They have no right to say such things, denigrating Monasticism in our time and scandalizing people. Some people are just looking for such an occasion for scandal.

In time, you will see some monasteries gradually doing away with the patristic readings so that they will not be censured by them. They will introduce other readings of a social nature because supposedly they are helpful in our times. That is where we're going! And the poor laypersons come to the monasteries to be helped... Just as the devout person in society is now scorned, soon the true monk will be scorned in the monasteries. If we are not vigilant to prevent the influence of the secular spirit from taking over, God forbid, before long, a young man will come to the monastery, wishing to live a true monastic life, and the others will say, "What business have you here with us?" When people see monks who are no different from lay people in the world, they become disillusioned with Monasticism in general. Many come and tell me how they are scandalized by certain monasteries. How am I now to correct such thoughts?

Much of the secular spirit has entered into Monasticism, and there is no end to it. Monks must be monks, not worldly people. We have lost the simplicity which the older generations had. Now the young monks are guided by human reasoning and a worldly politeness; they are too careful not to lose their good name and so forth. A few years ago one could still see in the *Coenobitic* Monasteries

the true Lausaikon[13] tradition of Monasticism. Some entered monasteries out of a divine zeal and others out of repentance. There were many different circumstances. Someone whose wife had died would leave the world and enter a monastery. Another who had lived a worldly life for years would repent and enter a monastery. You could find even possessed people in the monastery, who took refuge there and were healed by the prayers of the Fathers, and then stayed on to become monks. If afterward they fell into some disorder, they became possessed again, and so there were some who were possessed in the monasteries. You could also find some who were in error, others who were fools for Christ, and monks who had the gift of foresight and others with the gift of healing. There was a great variety! Today you find neither the gift of foresight, nor the gift of healing, not even any fools for Christ or any possessed. We now have the other foolishness, the foolishness of the world. We have become cerebral and this makes us fools. Much worldly reasoning has entered into our life and this abundance of reasoning is destroying everything. And to make things worse, we don't even realize it's a problem.

Today some monasteries are filled with all sorts of modern conveniences which make the monks' life 'inconvenient'. They fuss unnecessarily over details, but can't find time for the spiritual things that should be their first concern. If young people entering the monasteries merely exchange worldly anxiety for officiousness in the monastery, they won't find peace. Soon they will want to become spiritual tourists, to take trips, to have a break. "I want to take my holiday," they will tell you, whereas a monk should tear himself away from his monastic cell with difficulty.

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[13] The Lausiac History contains the biographies of ascetic Saints of Egypt and Palestine. The work was written approximately the middle of the 5th century by Bishop Palladios of Helenopolis in Bithynia and was dedicated to the Byzantine Patrician Lausos, from whom it takes its name.

I am exasperated by a lot of things, and this is why I'm speaking out. I am pained by the present situation, because in the past the poor monks didn't even have spiritual books and were ignorant of Monasticism, and yet were able to progress. Thirty percent of them were born to be monks; the others who entered the monasteries were uncultivated and, as the saying goes, *They were walnuts from five hundred different walnut trees*, and yet were able to progress. Someone would go to the monastery, knowing nothing about spiritual things. He could stay there for two or three months and not even the Abbot would know who he was. After that when he said that he wanted to become a monk, he went to the Spiritual Father, made his confession and stayed in the monastery. And no one knew what kind of person he was, where he had come from and so forth. And the newcomer, despite all the problems and shortcomings he may have had, progressed in the spiritual life. And some of them were not even literate. They listened to the readings in the Refectory and the Lives of the Saints in Church and nothing else. And sometimes they didn't even understand the readings in the Refectory. Neither did they understand much of the chanting; they merely said a few prayers during the Church services, but they had good thoughts. And yet they reached spiritual heights, whereas now with Sunday Schools, with spiritual books, with so many advantages, everything goes to waste! In other words, the uncultivated people have cultivated a remarkable spiritual life, while the cultivated ones have nothing! In a way, it's like having a cultivated field that doesn't even produce enough to pay for the seed sown! Isn't this a serious problem? How do you see it?

In any case, if we aren't careful, Monasticism will not be able to stand; it will be blown away. Of course, the future belongs to Christ, and the matter is in the hands of our Loving Mother, *Panaghia*, who will take up the broom and again sweep out and tidy up Her monasteries. We must understand that everything will be lost and that we will stand in debt before God, if we do not live a true and authentic monastic life. We started out to become monks to work for the salvation of our souls and to help the people in the world through prayer. For this reason do not forget the promise you made to Christ, as you must not forget what people have to endure in the world, who were not favoured to be called into the Angelic Order of Monasticism.

Let Us Leave an Inheritance

– Geronda, many people place their hopes on the monasteries. I feel the heavy burden of this responsibility.

– Yes, the only thing left now – as many say – is for some Saints, like Saint Cosmas the Aitolos, to go around the country preaching and enlightening the people. The monasteries are spiritual centres. If the monasteries were not there to help with the Greek Revolution of 1821, how could the Revolution have taken place? Again, during the German Occupation of World War II, it was the monasteries which held things together for the poor people. This is why they were destroyed later by the bands of Communist sympathizers during the guerrilla warfare. Most monasteries were not burned by the Germans; they were destroyed by these bands of Communist sympathizers. The Germans had threatened, "If we find weapons in the monasteries, we will burn them." To make themselves look good and to give the impression that it was the Germans who burned the monasteries, these bands conspired by leaving some old weapons in the monasteries and then reporting it to the Germans. When the Germans found these old weapons in the monasteries, they set the monasteries on fire. With this sinister technique, the Communist bands had many monasteries burned because they were afraid of them. This was their reasoning: "Even if the State becomes atheistic, we will not be able to achieve our goal if the monasteries remain, so let's burn them." And they burned them in this way.

Today people will go to the monasteries to find some spiritual yeast. But if the monasteries have become lukewarm and have no good spiritual yeast to give, what will people take? They won't find any yeast. We must therefore try to keep some yeast for the difficult years ahead. People who used to go to magicians and sorcerers now come to the monasteries for help. Later, people who are tired and weary of sin will come to us. And then even if we send them out to drink and to sin, they won't go.

During these difficult years, God is calling people with a personal invitation to join the ranks of Monasticism. This generation starts out for Monasticism on the best of terms, with ideals, but the devil renders useless all this potential. The next generation won't be like this.

Many will come to the monasteries who will not be suitable for the monastic life. They will be in such a state that they will be forced to become monks. They will be worn out and wounded by the world. Married couples will be divorced, with or without the blessing of the Church, and these spouses will go their separate ways to live in the monasteries. Young people who are weary of the worldly life will go to the monastery, some for the salvation of their soul, and others to find some peace and serenity. Others who really want to marry, but who are afraid to commit themselves to another person, will become monks. In other words, in the coming years people with mental illness and others who hesitate to start a family will perhaps come to the monasteries. They will be saying to themselves, "What will I find in married life? What will I do in the world? It's better to go and become a monk." That is to say, some people will take Monasticism to be a life of ease and idleness. Now, as to what kind of spiritual progress they may make, well, that's another matter. No one will come in a spirit of repentance. People will be in such a state that they'll be forced to become monks. Their motives won't be pure. This is the danger. It's different if someone sets out specifically to become a monk. These people will need a great deal of help, because, having tasted the pleasures of the world, the devil will oppose them more strenuously, while the rest of us will not be opposed so vigorously. With us the devil will try to prevent our spiritual work, to weaken our resolve with negligence or slothfulness, so that those who follow us will not find any spiritual yeast to ferment their own spiritual life.

What I'm trying to say with all this is that we must now make spiritual progress in order to be able to help these other people. We must leave them a patristic inheritance. We have spiritual joys, but we don't have heavenly joys. We have an ordination, a vigil, we chant the Psalm *Servants of the Lord*, and we even swing the chandeliers and experience joy. But these are not heavenly joys; they are physical joys of the heart, in the good sense of the term. Heavenly joy is something higher which cannot be expressed in words. When one begins to taste a little of these heavenly realities, the heart is profoundly stirred and seized by a divine madness. We must experience these joys of Heaven so we can transmit them to the coming generations.

CHAPTER THREE

The Deeper Meaning of Life

We Must Prepare For the Other Life

Geronda, a young man disappeared, after leaving a note to his parents that he was going to commit suicide, because he wasn't handsome, and that this was their fault.

– People haven't grasped the deeper meaning of life. They don't believe in the other life. This is where the whole torment of life begins. "I've been wronged," someone says, "others are happy, but I'm not happy." They aren't satisfied with what they have. Egoism enters into their life, and they are tormented. God loves everyone in the world. To each person He gave whatever is of benefit to him, stature, courage, beauty, intelligence and so on, whatever will be helpful, if utilized fully, for his salvation. And yet people are tormented. "Why am I like this, while he is like that?" But you have these qualities and he has other qualities. A Romanian fool for Christ who lived ascetically on the Holy Mountain said to someone who had such thoughts, "A bull frog saw a buffalo and said, 'I, too, want to be a buffalo.' The frog puffed and puffed himself up so much that he finally burst. God made the one a frog and the other a buffalo. The frog tried to be a buffalo and burst!" We must rejoice in the way the Creator has made each one of us.

When a person is helped to believe in God and in the future, eternal life – that is, when he grasps the deeper meaning of life – and repents and changes his way of life, divine consolation comes immediately with the Grace of God, which transforms the person and dispels all his inherited shortcomings. Many people who repented and struggled with *philotimo* and humility, received Grace and became Saints, whom we now revere with devotion and ask for their intercessions, whereas before they had many passions and inherited weaknesses. Take Hosios Moses the Ethiopian, for example, who was a most bloodthirsty robber, with an inherited evil tendency. As soon as he believed in God and repented, he disciplined himself in the Christian way of life and all his passions disappeared, allowing the Grace of God to come to him and to make him worthy even of the gift of prophecy. He even exceeded in Christian sensitivity Saint Arsenios[1] the Great, who was from the noblest family of Rome, with inherited virtues and a great scientific education.

– Geronda, what precisely is the meaning of this life?

– What is it? It is to be prepared for our homeland, for Heaven, for Paradise. The most important thing is for

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[1] Saint Arsenios the Great (354-447) was born in Rome. He was great in wisdom and virtue. He was called "father of kings," because Emperor Theodosios had appointed him to educate his two sons. In 394, after a divine inspiration, he left Rome for the desert of Egypt. Even though he had lived in the imperial palace, he distinguished himself as a monk of great austerity and ascetical practices.

man to grasp this most profound meaning of life, which is the salvation of the soul. When man believes in God and in the future life, then he understands the vanity of this present life and prepares his passport for the other life. We forget that all of us will leave this life. None of us are going to put roots down here. This present life is not for us to have a good time. On the contrary, it is meant for us to be tested and to pass over into the future, eternal life. Our goal here must be to prepare ourselves so we can depart with our conscience at ease when God calls us close to Him.

When Christ blessed the five loaves and satisfied the hunger of thousands of people, they immediately decided that He was the ideal person to become their king! They ate the five loaves and the two fish and were enthusiastic. But Christ told them not to be concerned about this earthly bread, for they are not destined to remain here on earth.[2] In this life, everyone is tested to see if he measures up to what God asks of him.

– Geronda, what must we always keep in mind in order to do God's will?

– We must keep our mind focused on God; think why we are here in this life. We didn't come here to do everything and be comfortable. We came to prepare ourselves for the other life. So our mind must constantly be there and on anything that will help us to get there. By facing this responsibility with *philotimo* and by undertaking a humble and *philotimo*-filled struggle we can understand the meaning of the spiritual life. The spiritual life is a brave undertaking, a spiritual feast. Do you have any idea what it means to have a feast, a *glendi*? It means grasping the deeper meaning of Monasticism, of spiritual nobility, of patristic sensitivity. Everyone has the responsibility of understanding the deeper meaning of life; not of Monasticism, but of life. If they did this, then people wouldn't be mean and petty, nor would they grumble with one another. Since there is divine retribution, let's be looking to earn some spiritual cash for there, and not how to maintain our dignity and enjoy human honour and esteem.

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[2] Cf. Jn 6:5 f.

When man places himself in the realm of real life, he enjoys everything. He rejoices in living and he rejoices in dying.[3] Not because he is tired of living, but because he will die and go to Christ.

– Geronda, does one rejoice because he does not oppose what God permits?

– He rejoices because he can see that this life is temporary, while the other is eternal. He's not tired of life, but he thinks, "What are we doing, aren't we leaving?" and he prepares himself for there, because he understands that this is his destiny, the meaning of life.

Social workers are very kind, the poor things, and work very hard to help others in need. They study psychology to prepare themselves for their work, but the way they try to help certain cases cause them to stand still. For example, a social worker goes to console and encourage a man with one leg, and he says to her, "You can tell me 'Good morning' with two legs, but I with only one." What can she say to him? How can she help him with psychology? If this person isn't helped to understand the deeper meaning of life, he can't be helped at all. He must understand that if he doesn't grumble about this disability permitted by God, he will be storing up a considerable heavenly reward in the other life, so he should be happy. And even if others walked with four legs, he could say, "Thank you God, for making me able to walk even with one leg." But social workers who don't have the necessary spiritual approach go to help and console the sick and don't know what to say to them. For example, a social worker goes to console a thirty-five-year-old woman with cancer who has three young children. What will she tell her? If that mother is not helped to understand the deeper meaning of life, she can easily fall into despair as she thinks of her children's future. The mother's despair is shared by the social worker, if she hasn't understood something spiritually higher, something more profoundly spiritual. If she lacks a profound spiritual awareness and commitment, the social worker won't be able to help in the right way to bring divine consolation to others. So, the poor things tire themselves out physically, but are also emotionally troubled and worried because they can't provide positive help. That is, they have to endure a double portion of weariness.

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[3] Cf. Php 1:21.

Consider the Good as a Need

Man must consider the good to be a need, otherwise he will be tormented. And we can't say that some people are unable to understand the good as a need. I cannot justify this, for even a five-year-old child can feel the good as a need. Let's say that a little child has a fever. The parents call the doctor and he tells them to hold the child firmly while he gives the injection. Later the child, on seeing the doctor, will cry and run away. But if from the beginning they tell the child, "Look, you're sick, you have a fever and you can't go to school or go out to play, while the other children are playing; but if you let the doctor give you a little pinch in the arm the fever will go away and you, too, will be able to go and play," the child will then directly close its eyes and stretch out its arm on his own. What I mean to say is that if the child can understand the good as a need, it's so much more true for an adult.

From the moment someone understands what is right, the matter is settled. Suppose I suddenly say to you, "I'll throw you out of the window." You understand what that means. Even a mentally-challenged person can understand that if someone falls out of a window high above the ground he will break his legs. He understands the difference between level ground and a dangerous cliff; what is good and what is evil. An adult who has read the Gospel, the writings of the Fathers, knows what is right. After that it's only a matter of turning the button. But often you say to people, "Why do you do that? Don't you know it's not right?" And they start, "Well, sadly that's how I am, I don't know why I'm like this, but that's how I was before too..." "Forget what you were before. Right now, as I speak to you, what are you doing to correct yourself?" It's different if they are incapable of understanding. But only an infant child will touch a burning coal instead of candy, because it doesn't understand.

– How did your mother, who was so sensitive and who loved you, manage to give you and your siblings a strict upbringing from your earliest childhood years?

– One can be helped from a young age to grasp the

deeper meaning of life and be happy for the right reasons. When I was a young boy I could outrun the other children in the neighbourhood. They didn't want me to race them and would send me away. They called me "the refugee boy". I would then go to my mother in tears. "Why are you crying?" she would ask. "The other children won't let me run," I would say. "You want to run? Here's our yard, run. Why do you want to run there, so others can see you and say bravo? This attitude has pride in it."

Another time I wanted to play with the ball and the children wouldn't let me. Again I went crying to my mother. "What happened, why are you crying again?" she asked. "They won't let me play with the ball," I said. "We have a big yard, you have a ball, play here. Why do you want the other children to see you and admire you? This attitude has pride in it." Then it occurred to me, "My mother is right." Gradually over time I didn't want to run or play ball in front of others, because I realized that this attitude had pride in it and I thought to myself, "These really are useless things; mother is right." After that I got over the problem, and when I saw the other children running and kicking the ball with pride, I would smile and think to myself, "What are they doing?" and I was just a small child in the third grade. From then on I lived a normal and natural life. So now if people ask me, "Would you prefer to climb Mount Athos barefoot in August over the briar leaves, or to go to a ceremony and be dressed with a cloak, and so on?", I will say I prefer to go barefoot up Mount Athos. Now, this I say not out of humility, but because this is what pleases me and gives me peace.

People who have pride were not helped at home in their childhood. The worldly frame of mind is tormenting for man. And if this isn't noticed and parents don't help their children from a young age, pride then becomes an abiding condition. It's one thing to praise and encourage a child so he doesn't get disappointed, and quite another to fill up his mind with egoism. For example, a child recited a poem but did it poorly and was disappointed. Then the mother can encourage him by saying, "But you did well enough." But if the child says the poem well and the mother begins in front of others to say, "Bravo, yours was the best recitation of all the children; my child is the best", this is wrong and harmful to the child. This is how parents often cultivate pride in their children. Or, to give you another example, a child misbehaves in school and is punished by the teacher. Then the child goes home and tells his parents, "The teacher punished me unfairly." When the father or mother supports the child and says in front of it, "I'll show that teacher; my child is the best...", then the child considers good what he did in school and is eventually tormented by useless things. The important thing is to teach the child a few basic things at home. If one grasps the deeper meaning of life from a young age, then everything goes well. Otherwise, one learns to be pleased with earthly things, with the praises of other men – which do not really please or comfort man – and he remains an earthly human being.

Let Us Help People in Repentance

– Geronda, what can help people most today?

– Today, if people could be taught repentance, this alone would be of great help. By reading as much as we can the lives of Saints which emphasize repentance, we

can benefit. To ask for repentance from God means to ask for enlightenment. When we ask for repentance and we repent all the more, naturally we will become more humble and by necessity we will receive more divine Grace, more divine enlightenment. When one is in a state of repentance, he retains the Grace of God. In any case people are good. You see, most people don't confess and don't go to Church; they are terribly ignorant about these things, and yet, on the other hand, they come and ask me for help. There is something in this.

– Geronda, do trials and tribulations become occasions for people to approach God?

– The well-disposed can benefit from the trials and tribulations they may encounter in life. But people who don't have a good disposition have a quarrel with God and curse Him. Unfortunately, they don't say, "I have sinned," but are tormented. The devil has a great deal of authority over people. We have given him many rights over us. Look what modern man has come to! The bad thing is that he himself obstructs divine intervention, because he has no spirit of repentance. If there was repentance, many things would have been corrected. But now we will go through storm after storm. God save us! We must ask for everyone to be granted a spirit of repentance, and for those who deliberately harm the Church and have no intention of correcting themselves; may God grant them repentance before they are taken from this life.

As far as we can, let us help people to repent, so that we may all receive God's blessings. Repentance and confession, that's what we need today. I constantly advise repentance and confession, so that the devil will lose his rights over us and the external demonic influences will be stopped. People need to be shaken up to understand, to repent. For example, someone confesses that he has committed adultery. The Spiritual Father conveys Christ's forgiveness and imposes a penance, but goes no further. The Spiritual Father must help this person understand that the sin was not just the adultery itself; it also involved other potential crimes such as the break-up of two families. Unfortunately, some Spiritual Fathers do not venture deeper into these spiritual matters to prick the penitent's conscience.

– Geronda, are there people who are good, but who don't go to Church often and don't have a sacramental life in the Church?

– It is possible once in a while to have someone who doesn't go to Church often, but who has devotion and kindness in his soul, thus making room for God to find a dwelling place there. Such people, reinforced by a sacramental life, would make tremendous progress in the spiritual life. On the other hand, there are other people who go to Church, confess, receive Communion, are observant, and yet God finds no room to dwell in them, because they have no humility, no kindness, and no true and authentic repentance. It is not enough to simply make your confession to the Spiritual Father; you must also truly repent of what you have done. Every prayer should begin with a confession before God. But this should not be a mere sentimental confession, relating our sins and then doing the same things all over again. This is not true awareness of our sinfulness. When we become truly conscious of our sins, this is shown by a certain degree of improvement in our spiritual life.

Have you noticed how simply the Israelites prayed to the Lord God? *Awake, why sleepest Thou, O Lord? Arise, cast us not off for ever!*[4] *Then the Lord awaked as one out of sleep, like a mighty man that shouteth by reason of wine. And he smote his adversaries backward.*[5] With what simplicity and with what humility, but also with what boldness did they address themselves to God, *What shall we now say to the nations, Lord? You have saved us through the Red Sea and now are we to die in the desert or be slaughtered by foreign enemies? Let us not become a laughing stock to the nations.*[6] We, of course, must be careful not to say any such word to God, "Why are You sleeping, Lord, and don't see what is happening?" He would surely give us a slap in the face as this would be impudent. The Israelites, however, said this with simplicity and humility. They did not blame God for their plight by saying, "Why did You do this?" Rather, they acknowledged their responsibility, "We deserved far greater tribulations, but now how can we answer our enemies who are taunting us if You do not help us?" And you can see how immediately the Lord yielded to their plea. Do you understand? There was acknowledgment of the fault, there was repentance, and the Lord intervened and routed the enemies. If we find ourselves in a difficult situation and don't confront it spiritually, then worldly people will say about us, "Where is your prayer? You say that you pray, but what are you really doing?" We are thus taunted and made a laughing stock.

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[4] Ps 44:23 (Ps 43:24 LXX).

[5] Ps 78:65-66 (Ps 77:65-66 LXX).

[6] Cf. Ex 32:12; Dt 9:28; Ps 79:10 (Ps 78:10 LXX).

Repentance Helps to Eradicate Evil

When we ask for repentance from God for everyone in the world, we must include ourselves among those who have need of repentance and must never say, "Lord, help the people who are sinners." The three Young Men of the Old Testament were born in captivity and yet did not say, "It is not our fault." They actually said, "We are justly suffering for our sins; we deserve to have suffered even more." They spoke as if they themselves had broken God's commandments before the Babylonian captivity; as if they were participants in the sin of their forefathers, even though they had no part, since they weren't even born then. I am so moved by the prayer they offered when placed in the fiery furnace, *For thou art just in all that thou hast done to us, and all thy works are true and thy ways right... For we have sinfully and lawlessly departed from thee, and have sinned in all things and have not obeyed thy commandments... And now we cannot open our mouths; shame and disgrace have befallen thy servants and worshippers. For thy name's sake do not give us up utterly and do not break thy covenant, and do not withdraw thy mercy from us, for the sake of Abraham thy beloved and for the sake of Isaac thy servant and Israel thy holy one.*[7] In other words, "Lord, You are just in punishing us because we have sinned, but for the sake of Abraham whom You love, as he did not sin, do not abandon us". By including themselves among the sinners and trusting God completely, the three Young Men survived the fiery furnace as a refreshing experience, while the pagan who went near to check things out was consumed by the flames.

If one doesn't work like this, he constantly finds excuses, "The devil made me do it." "It's Adam's fault, it's Eve's fault; it's not my fault." A theologian once told me, "Why should we suffer now because of Eve's disobedience?" "My good man," I told him, "does that bother you or prevent you from being saved?" Why blame poor Adam or the unfortunate Eve? They made one mistake and were in Hell for such a long time, while for us Christ has come and redeemed us all. And He has reassured us of His forgiveness, not only seven times but seventy times seven![8] Thousands of times we sin and Christ forgives us, as long as we repent sincerely, and we still dare to say that Adam or Eve is to blame? Notice how they hesitate to give the name Eve – to give the name of Eve to a nun, or at least Zoe, if Eve seems too difficult. In this respect, Eve is indeed wronged. She is our mother, the mother of all the people in the world, and we don't even want to hear her name. The curse in essence was given to the devil by God. *Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made.*[9] The devil entered the serpent to deceive man. And yet everyone blames Eve, saying that she brought us down and that we'd have been just fine in Paradise if she hadn't disobeyed. Now if Christ had said to us, "If you sin once, you, too, will go to Hell for so many centuries," then perhaps one might have some grounds for saying something. How ungrateful people can be!

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[7] The Prayer of Azariah and the Hymn of the Three Young Men, verses 4-12. In the LXX this is an addition to Daniel, inserted between 3:23 and 3:24.

[8] Cf. Mt 18:22.

[9] Gen 3:1.

Repentance is of great significance. Man doesn't realize that God's decision can be changed by repentance. This is not a small matter for man to have such power. You've done something wrong? God gives you a slap. You say, "I have sinned." He then stops and gives you blessings. In other words, the unruly child comes to his senses and is tormented by his conscience. Then the Father caresses His child with love and comforts it. Because the Israelites had strayed from God's commandments, they lived in exile for seventy-five years. Finally, when they had repented, Cyrus the king appeared, who one may dare to say proved himself better than the sons of Israel, who had polluted the sacred traditions of their worship of the true God. God changed Cyrus' mind and made him believe in the God of Heaven. Consequently, he set the Israelites free to return to their homeland and provided money and supplies to rebuild the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem. Cyrus showed such kindness and devotion that not even the Israelites themselves had shown.[10] And all this happened because the people repented and changed their way of life.[11] You see how much repentance can help in getting rid of evil!

Read all the books of Maccabees; they are very powerful. The king gave an order that the elephants be prepared to trample and kill the Israelites in a bloody ceremony. Five hundred elephants were given handfuls of frankincense and plenty of strong wine to enrage them

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[10] Cf. 1 Esd 1:1 f. (LXX).

[11] Cf. 1 Esd 8:88-92 (LXX).

for the cruel deed. Everybody was waiting for the king to appear, so the ceremony could begin. But the king had forgotten the order he had given. The man in charge of the elephants went to inform the king, who had yet to show up. "Come, O king, we await you. Everything is ready." But the king replied angrily, "Who told you to prepare for such a thing?" And this did not happen once but three times.[12] It was no small matter for the king to forget each time the order he had given repeatedly. And not only this, but in the end he completely changed his attitude toward the Jewish people, who with tears had prayed to their merciful God and Father to avert the danger facing them. True repentance is the key.

– Geronda, do the peace organizations established by various countries help in bringing peace to the world?

– It depends. There are some who begin with good intentions. But when all sorts of unrelated people – sorcerers, fire-worshippers, cultic religious types of all persuasions – enter into the mix and attempt to work together, how can there be a common purpose or a common ground for peace? God forgive me, but such things are the devil's rags. Can peace be achieved through sinful association? How can there be peace, when people are not reconciled with God? Only when man is reconciled with God can inward and outward peace come. But for us to be reconciled with God, we must first attain awareness, we must repent, we must live in accordance with God's commandments, and then the Grace and peace of God will enter into us, enabling us to also help create peace around us.

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[12] Cf. 3 Macc 5:1-35.

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Saint Arsenios the Cappadocian